Through the Chinese Mirror:

The Mechanics of the Unified Laws of History

(Drafted since 2022)

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Author's Preface (自序)

Like many Chinese of my generation, I spent my childhood and youth within a relatively oppressive "Chinese-style" family environment and educational system. Because the atmosphere around me strongly disapproved of "useless entertainment," and reading extracurricular books was one of the few methods of relaxation unlikely to attract criticism, I developed a deep reliance on reading during that time. During my formative years, I discovered that I was not a particularly extroverted person who loved making a wide circle of friends; rather, I was content with establishing profound bonds with a few individuals, and I felt genuine joy in helping others. During middle school, I would participate in community volunteer activities whenever I had free time, which was when I began to develop a concern for social realities.

During my undergraduate studies, my personal observations and reading led to growing doubts regarding the condition of Chinese society. I realized that there might be some more enduring, endogenous factors (内生性因素) influencing—or even determining—the course of China's history. This judgment prompted me to read a massive amount of literature on Chinese history in my spare time. For if such factors truly existed, it would be highly unlikely for me to glimpse the whole picture merely through a short-term historical process—such as one or two generations, or even a century or two. But how far back should I trace? I also felt that social science, unlike natural science or the mathematics I was studying, made it difficult to find an absolute, universally recognized, and standard "process of human history." Therefore, if I wanted to understand the rhythm of Chinese history, I had no choice but to look at the histories of many other countries and regions as mirrors. If I could find the point of divergence between China's historical trajectory and that of other parts of the world—especially Western civilization—then there would be an opportunity to find clues within Chinese history from that divergence up to the present. Fortunately, I found that many domestic and international scholars had already focused on this issue and made considerable progress, which made me even more convinced that obtaining an answer was not a mere fantasy.

Under the influence of three major events, I achieved some breakthroughs around the National Day of 2022. Subsequently, utilizing domestic and foreign materials, I confirmed that the direction of my thinking was fundamentally correct. These three events were: the draconian pandemic prevention policies (严苛防疫政策) that were arousing increasing public resentment in mainland China; Russia's foolish invasion of Ukraine and its botched performance; and the dramatic shifts in mainland public opinion surrounding the U.S. House Speaker's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Simultaneously, I personally felt the sharp deterioration of the environment in my own life: people's expectations for the economy turned extremely poor, and the birth rate data mercilessly laid the problems bare. These facts I observed prompted me to respond based on a certain human instinct: I needed an explanation for the changes. Why was the world evolving in the direction I was seeing?

By the end of that year, I had arrived at a new interpretation of Chinese history—or more accurately, a new periodization—one that can explain its continuous evolution from antiquity all the way down to the establishment and operational logic of the current Chinese regime. I realized that

many of the major historical questions debated by the Chinese historical community were now coherently encapsulated by this new interpretation. However, at that time, I was busy with my graduation and securing my spot for graduate school. More importantly, I was still questioning whether the methods and conclusions I adopted in researching Chinese history possessed universality (普世性). Did the developmental processes of other civilized societies experience the same stages and tendencies? If so, what exact variables ultimately caused them to diverge? I could not answer these questions at the time, so I did not record them.

Since then, in my spare time alongside my coursework, I have been continuously trying to resolve these remaining questions. By the autumn of last year (2024), I arrived at an affirmative answer. Although it sounds truly unbelievable, can the history of human civilization really be explained by unified sociological laws? Perhaps there will not be a definitive answer for several more generations, but I am convinced that I have taken a massive step forward. Although my work initially merely sought to answer a question I desperately wanted resolved for myself, I still decided to record my journey and discoveries, resulting in a manuscript of over 400,000 words.

Completing so many discoveries and drafting this manuscript was exceedingly arduous. Even disregarding the colossal scale and profound implications of the issues I was investigating, merely overcoming the difficulties imposed by my environment was no easy task. Readers will naturally understand that living in the place where I reside means not only that certain materials are less accessible, but also that one inevitably carries some deeply ingrained habits when observing issues. Over the course of several years, I have constantly struggled against the "conditioned viewpoints" (既定视角) I possessed, striving to ensure that their limitations did not compromise the credibility of the arguments themselves.

Of course, relying solely on the guarantee of rationalism, balancing a sensitivity to human moral conscience, and expanding the scope of information search are not enough. Ultimately, whether any scientific theory is correct requires it to withstand testing. People often say that falsifiability (可证伪性) should be a vital characteristic of science. Can social science achieve falsifiability? It is currently unknown. As a student of mathematics, I think that no matter how hard social science tries, it cannot unfold through formal logic and axiomatic systems (形式逻辑和公理化体系) like mathematics. But people should at least strive to bring its rigor closer to the natural sciences. Therefore, I extensively examined the affairs of the world in all directions, from ancient times to the present—paying particular attention to learning the academic consensus on certain historical questions and acknowledging them when the evidence was sufficient—to subject every one of my arguments to the most neutral testing possible.

Now, I can say with great certainty that my newly discovered theory is reliable. Because I realized that I have overturned almost none of the accepted consensus; rather, I have pieced the already-acquired puzzle pieces into a unified picture. If the overall history of humanity were an elephant,

then according to the Chinese idiom of "blind men touching an elephant" (盲人摸象), previous scholars have practically touched every part of the elephant. They provided highly precise descriptions of the parts they examined. The problem lies in the fact that these pioneers had no way of realizing that they were, in fact, touching the *same* "elephant." What I did was merely to touch again the parts people had already touched, and make necessary corrections to some erroneous records. For example, when earlier scholars touched the elephant's ear and wrote down, "This is a fan," I would correct it to, "This is an ear." But, of course, our views on the shape and size of the elephant's ear are identical; just as I would not "invent" new historical facts. The sole issue is that past scholars were highly likely unable to provide accurate qualitative characterizations for solid historical facts, resulting in 'functional misinterpretations.' I discovered that we only need to modify the few most critical characterizations and restore them to their correct positions within the historical structure; then, the puzzle almost naturally pieces itself together. That I was able to discover these few most critical errors is entirely thanks to the peculiarity of Chinese history within human history, and to the fact that the abysmal explanatory power of official historiography planted the seeds of doubt in people's minds.

Introduction (导言)

For a long time, both the mainstream Western Sinological community, including that of the United States, and the Japanese community of Oriental history, when discussing the "point of divergence" between the historical processes of China and the West, have generally tended to locate it within the last millennium. Among them, theories positing an earlier timeframe (such as the "Tang-Song Transition" theory / 唐宋变革论) believe the decisive change occurred between the Tang and Song dynasties; while theories positing a later timeframe argue that this Great Divergence did not truly become prominent until the Ming and Qing dynasties or even the ***early modern period***.

Based on the perspective and methodology of comparative historical sociology, I argue that the point of divergence between the historical processes of China and other parts of the world should be traced back much earlier. It ought to be located in China between the 3rd and 6th centuries CE during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties (魏晋南北朝)—a stage referred to by Western scholars as "**Early Medieval China**." The reason is that, although China experienced a massive migration of peoples similar to that in Western Europe, its process of ***feudalization*** (封建化) suffered an interruption and regression, leading to the abnormal restoration of the bureaucratic system in the 7th century.

To understand the causes behind this phenomenon, I believe we must trace back at least to the mid-Warring States period of China, with a particular focus on the profound political changes that occurred during the mid-Western Han Dynasty—the period of the most intense warfare between the Han Empire and the Xiongnu (匈奴). Simultaneously, this observation must be extended forward to the Northern and Southern Song dynasties. During those three hundred years, although the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) in China had been completely suppressed by the ***bureaucratic state***, intellectuals still possessed a relatively clear concept of a "***feudal era***" (***feudal period*** ／封建时代). If we cannot understand—under the premise that the ***feudal economic system*** (封建经济制度) inevitably became the historical mainstream—exactly what methods the Chinese bureaucratic system employed to strangle the ***feudal political system*** (封建政治制度), rendering the Chinese ***landlord class*** unable to transform into "***feudal lords***" like their counterparts in Western Europe and Japan, then we will never be able to provide a logically consistent explanation for the stagnation and distortion of Chinese society over the millennium from the Sui and Tang down to the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In **Chapters 1 and 2**, I first point out the fact that China's ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制) was not destroyed during the worldwide collapse of ***classical empires*** (caused by

feudalization and the influx of borderland peoples), and that the ***bureaucratic state*** was rebuilt around 600 CE. The ethnic minorities that entered ***the Central Plains*** (中原) relatively rarely deprived the Han people—especially Han landlords—of their land property rights; that is, they did not choose ***feudalization*** but instead turned to bureaucratization. This phenomenon of compromise was a crucial external factor in the survival of the bureaucratic system. I focused on examining the historical documents from the phase of confrontation between the Eastern Wei, Northern Qi, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou (东魏、北齐和西魏、北周), finding compelling evidence of distinct ***feudalization*** characteristics emerging in northern China during this period. As for the internal factor—namely, the issue that China's pre-existing bureaucratic system was already too entrenched before the massive inward migration of ethnic minorities—I trace its origin back to the mid-Western Han Dynasty in Chapter 2, with supplementary explanations provided in subsequent sections of the manuscript.

In **Chapter 3**, based on the research achievements Western scholars have made regarding ***early modern society*** (近代社会) and ***absolutist states*** (绝对主义国家), I argue that the "***classical period"*** (***classical era*** / 古典时期) ought to possess distinct transitional characteristics, much like the ***early modern period***. This explains the phenomenon of the universal rise of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) in Rome, Iran, India, and China in the centuries around the turn of the common era. Furthermore, through comparison with general ***classical states***, one can see much more clearly the unique changes that occurred in China during the mid-Western Han Dynasty.

In **Chapter 4**, utilizing the research achievements of Japanese scholars, I use Japan and China as a control group. Japan introduced a bureaucratic system from China in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, yet ultimately still evolved into a ***feudal society*** similar to ***medieval*** Western Europe. By comparing Japan with China, we can not only more clearly understand how the Chinese bureaucratic system shaped Chinese history since the Tang Dynasty, but also understand why Japan was able to become a uniquely developed nation in Asia. **Chapter 5** briefly discusses the two regimes of Nanzhao (南诏) and Dali (大理) in the Yunnan region, realigning the history of the southwestern region, which has been inverted in our national historical narrative.

In **Chapter 6**, through theoretical deduction, I explain why China could not embark on the path to modernization on its own like Western Europe, and why it evolved into a so-called communist state in the last century. The most extraordinary innovation of this chapter is that I break through the limitations of Marx and Engels, who only traced their political economy and class view of history back to humans. Instead, I trace the roots of historical materialism back to the material world itself —namely, which *factor of production* occupies the core position in labor production. In doing so, I avoid the dilemma of having to resort to moral criticism, sweeping away the previous "idealistic materialism" (唯心的唯物主义). It is precisely the pioneering achievement of this chapter that enables me to provide relatively precise definitions for those vague and erroneous concepts previously utilized by people. In **Chapter 7**, I refute two popular theories: that the maintenance of

the Chinese bureaucratic system was necessitated by the military pressure of northern nomadic peoples, and by the need for water conservancy construction.

Chapters 8 and 9, through my personal reflections on certain practical and cognitive issues existing in Chinese society, illustrate the impact of the interruption of ***feudalization*** and the restoration of the bureaucratic system on contemporary China. **Chapter 10** is a brief essay focusing on the seasonal cycles of political tension. **Chapter 11**, by reviewing vital fragments from the histories of the Islamic world and the Byzantine Empire, reveals a series of major impacts caused by the process of ***feudalization*** in ***the Near East region*** (近东地区). In particular, by using Byzantium—a ***classical state*** that at first glance appears similar to China but is fundamentally different, and which survived the wave of ***feudalization***—as a comparison, I emphasize the peculiarity of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度).

Chapter 12 re-narrates human history using my adjusted periodization theory, placing the focus on the period from the formative stage of the ***classical era*** to the ***Late Middle Ages*** (中世纪晚期). In this chapter, I further perfect the theory of the formation mechanism of ***classical empires***, completely explain the reasons for the "divergence" (分流) between China and the West, and smoothly apply the British sociologist Michael Mann's distinction between ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) and ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) to my investigation. I explore the differences in historical developmental processes between China and other major regions of the world, and, using the history of the spread of Buddhism as an example, re-describe the changes in social thought during the process of ***feudalization***. I review the economic differences between China and the West in the pre-industrial period—an issue scholars have always focused on—and point out that this difference should be attributed to the restoration of the bureaucratic system, which in turn consolidated the restored bureaucratic system. Regarding modern and contemporary Chinese issues of concern to domestic and foreign observers, I also provide new answers based on the course of Chinese history. In Section 30 of Chapter 12, I provide explanations for the terminology used throughout this record that might invite questioning.

Chapter 13 contains my insights and reflections, reaffirming the existence of unified scientific laws in the development of human history, denying the possibility of a direct transition from the ***classical period*** to the ***early modern period***, and pointing out the potential obstructive role of technological progress on mutual understanding between nations.

When I first set pen to paper to write such a record, my initial intention was merely to use the countries of the world as mirrors to reflect China's past and reality. However, as I neared completion, I discovered: for other countries in the world, is China not also a mirror in which they can clearly see themselves? The successes, failures, advantages, and blunts in Chinese history reveal the origins of "***modernity***" (现代性) to people from an absolutely unique angle.

After reading the main text of the manuscript, readers might naturally develop the following question: the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素) and the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列) delineated by it undoubtedly occupy the core of the manuscript's theory, yet the frequency of the ***primary factor of production*** appearing in the text is actually not high. In reality, it is exceedingly difficult for people to quantitatively determine which factor of production occupied the primary position in a specific society during a specific historical period. In practice, when determining the ***primary factor of production***, we still rely on observations of social structures and social phenomena. This also makes it impossible for me to let the ***primary factor of production*** directly participate in explaining too many historical issues, because doing so would easily trap me in circular reasoning [循环论证], which I find utterly unacceptable.

As the author, my response to this question is this: **The true value of this manuscript lies not merely in proposing a few new historical explanations, but in forming a new hierarchical level for observing the historical evolution of human society.**

My friends, please consider this: Has the field of social sciences in the past truly lacked insightful theories? Absolutely not. Some theories emphasize ***class*** (阶级) relations, some emphasize economics, some emphasize geopolitics, and some emphasize culture and religion—examples are **too numerous to list** (不胜枚举). A wise person would not deny the success achieved by these existing theories; they have indeed explained portions of historical truths. However, these theories frequently sink into protracted debates precisely because they mutually attempt to become the *sole* explanation, to the extent that academic research degenerates into factional politics. The reason why generations of debate have failed to allow any single theory to ultimately **unify the realm** (一统天下) is likely because, although these theories all possess merit, the vast majority of them remain situated on the exact same analytical level.

Therefore, this manuscript does not attempt to replace existing theories with a new one; rather, it attempts to elevate the hierarchical level of historical observation further upward. The proposition of the ***primary factor of production*** is not intended to directly explain all historical phenomena, but to elevate the dimension of observation, redefining the applicable scopes for different theories. To borrow the language of mathematics, every single theory is not an independent variable [自变量] capable of determining all answers. If the ***primary factor of production*** is the paramount independent variable, then some theories study the initial conditions, some study the parameters, some study the intervening variables [中间变量], some study boundary effects, some study regular perturbations, and some study random perturbations. The relationship among different theories is no longer one of mutual competition and mutual exclusion; instead, within a unified framework, they separately explain historical issues at different levels, collectively constituting the "evolutionary

equation of human society" [人类社会的演化方程]. **I believe that a good theory does not demand that the world submit to it, but rather helps the world better understand itself.**

Therefore, the ***primary factor of production*** essentially plays the role of a figurehead monarch; as a overarching analytical principle, it **reigns but does not rule** (统而不治). It is not like a despotic monarch [专制君主] who must be **attending to myriad daily affairs and making dictatorial decisions** (日理万机、乾纲独断), existing as an exhaustive, all-encompassing explanatory tool. The ***primary factor of production*** will not replace economic, class, cultural, military, or geopolitical analyses. Instead, exactly like a constitutional monarch [立宪君主], it grants various theories their respective legitimate positions, providing a shared historical coordinate system for these analyses so that they can be **secure in their proper places** (各安其位) and cooperate harmoniously, no longer overstepping their bounds. What the attempts of this manuscript truly seek to alter is not any single historical conclusion, but rather the very methodology by which historical facts are observed and organized—yet it is solidly built upon the foundation of public consensus already established within the academic community.

Throughout the process of writing this manuscript, I have constantly harbored the following conviction: **Any theory must accept questioning; any explanation must face evidence; any conclusion must allow itself to be overturned.** I hope this manuscript can provide convenience for humanity's future exploration of itself. Anyone is welcome to criticize, revise, expand upon, or refute any viewpoint within it. If superior evidence and reasoning emerge in the future, the pursuit of truth should perpetually transcend loyalty to the manuscript itself. If this manuscript can bring any tangible change to the world, I believe it lies in this: regardless of its degree of success or failure, it will ultimately reduce the costs and prices exacted by "cognitive fallacies" within the social sciences.

The manuscript was initially completed in mid-March 2025. The following year may one day be engraved in human history as the "Year One of AI." Feeling the astonishing impact of AI increasingly in my life and studies, this revolution inspired me, leading me to complete the manuscript's postscript (**Chapter 14**) in the spring of 2026, wherein I explored what kind of shock the rise of artificial intelligence will bring to China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system***. In May, approaching my graduation with a master's degree, I also wrote a short essay titled "Thoughts on the Future" (展望未来), attempting to make limited predictions about the future of humanity based on the discovered theories. This short essay is not included in the manuscript.

VOLUME I: IN BEIJING (第一篇：在北京)

Chapter 1: Why Has China Maintained Unity for a Relatively Long Time

1. The Question is Not Why Unity Persisted, But Why It Was Rebuilt

Today, I believe I have obtained the answer to a crucial question—one that has puzzled countless scholars: why has China been able to maintain national unity over a relatively long historical period? Here, "unity" refers to the concept of a cultural ***community*** (共同体) or cultural sphere. Naturally, this also requires us to consider the sheer territorial size and historical length of the state itself. Our country's history textbooks and official historiography never shy away from this point; they heavily propagandize it as a symbol of China's superiority, a matter worthy of national pride.

However, our country's historical narratives are saturated with teleology (先定论) and myths. For example, during compulsory education history classes, when teachers arrive at a certain historical fact in chronological order, they require students to memorize the impacts and significance of this event, simply because these will become testing points in exams. But from a research perspective, whether it is the impact of a historical event or the evaluation of a historical figure's achievements, it must inevitably be post-determined (后定的)—only time can reveal the true caliber of an endeavor.

More severely, official historiography is highly inclined to attribute China's unity to the civil and military statecraft of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Ying Zheng (秦始皇帝嬴政), in initially unifying and pacifying the realm—namely, treating the pacification of the Six States, the establishment of the emperor system, and the standardization of weights and measures (度量衡), writing, currency, etc., as the historical roots of our country's long-term unity. But obviously, this view is extremely unconvincing. First, some of these measures essentially played no role at all; second, some measures were significant but not necessarily strongly correlated with political unity; third, looking globally, many rulers outside of China adopted similar measures at different times, yet clearly, no other country followed the same developmental trajectory as China; finally, the rapid collapse and demise of the Qin Dynasty following its unification serves as rather direct proof of its governance failure.

A highly typical example is the so-called standardization of weights and measures. In Chinese, the three characters *du* (度), *liang* (量), and *heng*(衡) measure an object's length, volume, and mass, respectively. However, at the political level, these three units of measurement can hardly be treated as equals. The unit of mass is extremely closely tied to trade; it not only provides the precise weight of goods but is also required to calibrate the value of precious metal currencies—which, even in ancient societies, were widely recognized across the world as functioning as general equivalents (一般等价物). The scope of such trade far exceeded the borders of any single state, thereby allowing the use of mass units and currency forms to easily cross political boundaries.

A unit like the ounce, even after the collapse of Rome when most of Europe was never again under a single regime for long, continued to be commonly used by many European countries. The carat, currently the unit for measuring the mass of gemstones, was originally nothing more than the mass of a plant seed, yet it came to be commonly used by numerous nations across Eurasia and Africa with different ethnicities, religious beliefs, and even those actively at war with one another. Such situations also existed in the **pre-feudal period**. For example, the Talent (塔兰同), a unit of mass used in the ancient ***Near East*** and the Greco-Roman world, was utilized across the borders of empires. Currencies are the same: the coins of the Byzantine Empire were accepted in the Persian region, and the copper coins of the Song Dynasty were highly popular in Japan. This was the result of economic interests and market forces, not something dictated by political coercion.

On the eve of the Qin dynasty's unification, an obvious fact is that a nationwide market had already formed. Otherwise, the *Warring States period* (战国时期) would not have seen the emergence of world-renowned commercial hubs like Dingtao (定陶), as well as a large number of immensely wealthy merchants—even grand merchants like Lü Buwei (吕不韦), whose entry into politics allowed him to profoundly influence the political trajectory.

It is precisely based on this fact, supported by historical examples outside of China, that I believe there is absolutely no reason to assume that even if China had not achieved political unification, the various kingdoms that had reached a balance of power would not have shared common mass units and currency forms. Conversely, could these elements, which were capable of unifying spontaneously due to commercial factors, truly and firmly sustain political unification? Obviously, they could not. Even if European nations adopted the same weight units and currencies, it could not prevent them from going to war with one another. For Christians and Muslims in border regions, they might have used the exact same currency and weighing standards, but this could not guarantee they would perpetually shake hands in peace.

In short, a unified market does not equate to a politically unified state. Furthermore, we can discover that written script is the exact same case. The unified Roman Empire used Latin, and subsequently, the Catholic Church also used Latin. The problem is that even though Latin was the official and universal written language of the Catholic states of Europe during the ***Middle Ages*** (中世纪), no single state was ever seen recreating the Romans' grand achievement. In fact, starting from the ***Late Middle Ages***, the status of Latin gradually declined, while the vernacular scripts of various peoples rose in tandem with the sprouting of nation-states.

A concept that stands in stark contrast to this involves units of length and volume (capacity). The latter is largely calibrated by the former, because volume is fundamentally the cube of length. These two concepts are highly bound to politics. This is because taxation—as one of the fundamental functions of the state apparatus—must be measured using length and volume. The former determines the area of land, while the latter measures the quantity of grain.

The consequence of this binding is that the use of length units is intimately connected to political borders. Before the global adoption of the metric system, Russia had the verst (俄里), Britain had the mile (英里), Japan had the Japanese ri (日本里), and China had the Chinese li (中国里); even different regions within the same country had different length standards. Before Italy's unification in 1870, there were almost as many length standards as there were states. ***Medieval*** monarchs even used the length between the joints of their own bodies to establish a standard.

Whether political power is strong or weak determines how wide a scope the length standard established by that regime will be utilized. In Japan's ***Late Middle Ages***, the regimes of Oda Nobunaga (织田信长) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (丰臣秀吉) both made the Kinki region (近畿地区) their center of rule. Therefore, when the *Azuchi-Momoyama regime* (安土桃山政权) conducted nationwide land surveys (Kenchí 检地), they used the land standards of the Kinki region to measure land throughout the country (which, of course, also included the *shō* [升], a unit of volume).

However, a highly notable issue is that Chinese historical records do not actually believe that the "measure of length" (*du* 度) was unified during the reign of Qin Shi Huang. The *Yantie Lun* (Discourses on Salt and Iron / 盐铁论), authored by Huan Kuan (桓宽) in the Western Han Dynasty, cites the argument of the "*Ministers of Profit*" (兴利之臣)—the faction of the Censor-in-Chief (*Yushi Daifu* 御史大夫), Sang Hongyang (桑弘羊). It points out that, in reality, it was during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝)—the longest-reigning monarch of the Han Dynasty—that China finally achieved the unification of length (du). This emperor unified the mu (亩, a unit of land area) system across the *Guandong* (关东) and *Guanxi* (关西) regions, enabling all the land under heaven to be measured by a single standard. Furthermore, this argument was not questioned by the "Worthies and Literati" (*Xianliang Wenxue* 贤良文学) faction during the debate.

Equally, a crucial enterprise finally completed during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han was the currency reform. In fact, the term "currency reform" is highly deceptive and misleading. From the perspective of the market and economic laws, the form of currency itself can reach a consensus without the need for political coercion—though political measures can, of course, accelerate this process. When we speak of the Han Dynasty's currency reform today, to a large extent, we are not referring to the final establishment of the *Wuzhu coin* (五铢钱) as the standard currency form. Rather, we are referring to the fact that the right of coinage (铸币权) was completely withdrawn from the localities and centralized in the hands of the central government. This was achieved when state power surged to its absolute zenith during the ***classical period*** (古典时期). In contrast, during

the Qin Dynasty, the failure of grassroots governance meant that the Qin Empire could not possibly stop the illicit minting of private currency; thus, this matter had to be dragged out for a century until it was resolved by Liu Che (刘彻).

Considering a more extreme scenario: so what if two or more currencies circulate within a single country? Japan during the early and mid-Edo period (江户中前期) serves as an excellent example. The fact is that, even without the coercive regulatory measures of the Chinese Empire, Japan during the Edo period still experienced what could be called miraculous economic progress, and the national unity of Japan was similarly consolidated during its ***early modern period*** (近世). Given this, exactly how many of the measures taken by Ying Zheng—this so-called "emperor of the millennia"—were truly beneficial to Chinese society, and how many were merely driven by the despotic and arrogant ambitions of an autocratic ruler?

The doubts raised above not only point out that it is extremely absurd to believe that a few top-down measures adopted by Qin Shi Huang—under circumstances where there was absolutely no administrative power to enforce them, and fundamentally no adequate time to popularize them—somehow laid the foundation for long-term unity. Moreover, these doubts quickly redirect the issue toward a new direction. For example, as we mentioned earlier regarding the unification of script: the Roman Empire used Latin, and the Catholic Church used Latin. Then, why did ***vernacular languages*** (封建民族语言 / 地方俗语) begin to rise across Europe during the ***Late Middle Ages***, causing Latin to eventually become a "language of the museum"? (Here, I ask readers to note the specific context brought about by the place where I live: in mainland China, when people speak of "Latin," they are referring specifically to the language with a unified written script used by the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church—one of the "universal languages of the four corners" of a ***classical empire***—while French, Spanish, and Italian are not called Latin).

This line of thought is of utmost importance. It actually pinpoints a fatal flaw in official historiography: the problem of China's unity is absolutely not a question of why it was completed, but rather a question of why it was rebuilt after being interrupted. We will immediately see the astonishing results this line of thought brings.

Since teleology (先定论) presents so many problems, how then do we "post-determine" (后定地) the answer to this question? I believe the key might lie in comparative historical sociology (比较历史学). We must utilize stage-by-stage comparisons to finally determine at which historical moment the divergence between China and the rest of the world occurred.

If we compare the ancient civilization of China with other civilizations on the Eurasian continent and even the New World, their beginnings were similar. Following the agricultural revolution, settlements first emerged in regions with relatively advanced production, subsequently forming

cultures that radiated across certain areas. During the Neolithic Age, class stratification appeared, followed by early city-states. Although the cultural radiation of early city-states could be highly extensive—with artifacts bearing their cultural characteristics being unearthed in distant lands—their actual political influence was exceedingly limited. This was true not only in relation to humans but also to nature. Early city-states were often established in geographically advantageous natural locations; however, underdeveloped ***productive forces*** (生产力) left humans lacking the capacity to transform their surrounding environment. Therefore, they were much like isolated islands in the wilderness.

Once evident climate or geological disasters occurred, these one or two isolated islands could easily be "submerged," and the local inhabitants would have no choice but to face the prospect of crossing an unknown "ocean" to try and find the next "island." Hence, in early human societies—regardless of where on the Eurasian continent—archaeologists are constantly faced with a specific set of questions: Why was this early city abandoned? Why did this culture disappear in such a short time? Why do we not know the whereabouts of the ancestors of this culture?

This precisely reflects the characteristics of that era: people lacked the ability to "reclaim land from the sea" beyond their isolated islands. Once this island could no longer sustain life, the inhabitants simply could not guarantee they would survive to reach the next "island of civilization." They were highly likely to perish; and if they detached themselves from relatively developed agricultural regions, their society would undergo regression, to the point of losing their original cultural characteristics. The early regimes of the Xia (夏) and Shang (商) dynasties were constrained by such low ***productive forces***. The frequent relocations of the capital during the early and middle Shang Dynasty were highly likely caused by these low ***productive forces***; agricultural farming methods were far too crude, making it necessary to seek a new ruling center after a certain period to allow the original land to restore its fertility. Along with the advancement of production, politics began to stabilize during the middle and late Shang Dynasty, and the craftsmanship of bronze wares experienced a massive leap forward.

By the Zhou Dynasty (周代), social ***productive forces*** in ***the Central Plains*** (***Zhongyuan*** / 中原) had risen to such a level that people had mastered a certain degree of methods for transforming nature. They could open up new base areas of civilization in wildernesses where civilization previously could not set foot. This was much like creating a new island through land reclamation in the sea beyond the original isolated islands. The rule of the Zhou Dynasty adapted to this new situation. According to the patriarchal clan system (Zongfa 制度) based on bloodlines, the Zhou rulers dispatched their relatives and meritorious officials, providing them with certain initial assistance, and sent them to distant eastern lands to establish states. This was a system of "colonization," while the most critical locations—such as vital transportation routes and regions rich in metal deposits—were entrusted to their own relatives.

This grand expansion brought about by the advancement of ***productive forces*** did not occur solely in China. In Greece, after the end of the Dark Ages, the Greeks and Phoenicians established a vast

number of new colonies and city-states across the Mediterranean; city-states like Carthage even developed into great powers in later days. The environment of the Iranian Plateau was also gradually transformed. Civilization broke out of Mesopotamia and Elam, and new regimes were established in the hinterland of the plateau, eventually growing into a pivotal empire in later times. The Aryans (this term is too archaic; it seems more appropriate to say populations speaking Indo-European languages) moved eastward, first entering the Indus Valley, and subsequently gradually completing the conquest of Northern India during the final millennium BCE.

During this period, Chinese history did not exhibit characteristics distinct enough to differentiate it from other parts of the world. As the colonial expansion of the final stage before the common era reached its zenith, a series of unprecedentedly colossal ***classical empires*** emerged. These included the First Persian Empire through the Second Persian Empire (with the Sassanid Dynasty serving as the ***typical classical empire***), the Macedonian Empire and its successors, the Roman Empire, the Maurya Empire, and the Gupta Empire (with India featuring the Gupta Empire as its ***typical classical period***), as well as the Qin and Han Empires. If we solely consider the stages of historical development and broaden the time constraints, the Khmer Empire (高棉帝国) is undoubtedly one of them as well.

These empires shared many commonalities, including: unprecedentedly vast territories, expanded monarchical authority, strengthened administrative power, highly developed commodity economies, high urbanization rates, and bureaucratic systems that were more perfected than ever before. These regimes frequently adopted measures similar to those of the Qin Empire: the unification of various measurement standards and the establishment of official written scripts. Although this fact is not difficult to understand, within the academic environment of our country, it is truly not universally known. There is no doubt that the Qin and Han Empires were part of a normal historical current (specific explanations will follow later). Therefore, an observer must continue looking further down the timeline.

Within at most ten centuries, all ***classical empires*** disintegrated; not a single one could escape this fate. Moreover, this disintegration also possessed a high degree of similarity: political collapse, chaotic wars among warlords, the shrinking of the ***commodity economy*** (商品经济), and severe urban decay. The most fascinating characteristics are two-fold: first, the large-scale migration of ethnic minorities and their penetration into the core regions of civilization; second, following the decline of the ***commodity economy***, self-sufficient production units increasingly formed at the local level, a phenomenon often regarded outside of China as the beginning of ***feudalization*** (封建化).

The most typical examples in this historical process were Rome and China. Positioned respectively at the western and eastern ends of the Eurasian wave of human migration, chaotic warlord divisions and the inward migration of ethnic minorities shattered these two empires. In China, as ***feudalization*** unfolded, a number of aristocratic clans (Shizu / 士族) possessing massive

agricultural estates emerged, evolving into powerful elite lineages (Menfa / 门阀) during the empire's disintegration and wielding formidable influence in state politics.

Similarly, the Khmer Empire, as the last ***classical empire*** in human history—even if delayed by a millennium—experienced the exact same fate. The ethnic migrations in the Indochinese Peninsula originated from southwestern China; starting from the Tang Dynasty, the continuous southward push of the Thai and Burmese peoples destroyed the great empires of the Indochinese Peninsula, just as the *Five Barbarians* (五胡) and the various Germanic peoples of Europe had done previously.

In the central part of the Eurasian continent, the Persian region began to suffer increasingly frequent incursions by nomadic tribes. However, unfortunately, due to its overly central geographical position, the agony of ***barbarian*** (蛮夷 / 蛮族) invasions could obviously not be concluded after just one or two occurrences, unlike in other countries around the world. Even in the South Asian subcontinent, invasions by nomadic peoples posed massive threats over a certain period. Six centuries later, Turkic Muslims (this description is indeed the popular understanding among the Chinese; after all, it is difficult for people in China to distinguish between Turks and Persians. Accurately speaking, they should be described as conquerors with a mixed Turco-Persian cultural background) kicked open the doors to India, turning this threat into a reality.

That is to say, up until this point, the historical process of China had still not presented a decisive divergence from the rest of the world. However, in the subsequent period, this divergence clearly occurred. (The situations of Byzantium, Iran, and the Arabs were relatively unique and will be discussed later).

Three centuries after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the various Germanic peoples who had successfully invaded the Western Empire began to establish new regimes locally, embraced Christianity, and laid the foundation for the European ***feudal system***. This was an outcome of universal significance. Disregarding the complex spatiotemporal processes in between, new empires did not emerge from the ruins of ***classical empires***; instead, those former ***barbarians*** ultimately evolved into a multitude of nation-states after undergoing ***feudalization*** (封建化). We can now easily name a string of such countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and even Turkey.

The only somewhat different case is India. However, we must point out that India's current unity is largely owed to the British. Between the Maurya Empire and India's independence, a unified India ruled by Indians and adhering to Indian religions was long unimaginable. Even when the South Asian subcontinent was largely integrated under a single regime, it was the work of Turks and Mongols, with the Indians as the ruled.

Only in China, less than three centuries after the fall of the Western Jin Dynasty (西晋), did the Sui and Tang empires reunify the state. Furthermore, with the reunification of the empire, the forces of division weakened increasingly over time, while political unity grew ever more consolidated. By the late imperial period of the Ming and Qing dynasties, a scenario of fragmentation like that of the *Three Kingdoms*, *Northern and Southern Dynasties*, or *Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms* (三国南北朝五代十国) had become unimaginable.

At this point, a fundamental divergence surfaces. In making the above deduction, we actually adopted a method similar to an electrician troubleshooting a circuit: first, a voltage tester (测电笔) reveals no problem at the first node; the second node still has no problem. But when the current or voltage is abnormal at the third node, we can assert that a fault has occurred in the circuit between the second and third nodes. What must be done now is to trace backward from the third node to find exactly where the problem lies. Although circuit troubleshooting and historiography appear completely different, I sense that the scientific spirit within them is identical, and their methodologies are highly likely interconnected. Since this decisive difference occurred at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries CE, we must consider the following conclusion: on the eve of reunification, Chinese society had evidently already developed a fundamental divergence compared to the rest of the world, especially Europe. Where exactly did this divergence lie?

Once the deduction reached this step, no progress was made for nearly two years. However, last week, while casually scrolling through short videos on my phone, I suddenly came across a concept I had seen countless times before: the Five Surnames and Seven Prominent Families (*Wuxing Qiwang* / 五姓七望). During the Sui and Tang dynasties, this term referred to several of the most powerful and prestigious grand families in Northern China. I had seen this concept so many times before without feeling anything in particular, but this time, it suddenly struck me: on the eve of China's reunification, there were the Five Surnames and Seven Prominent Families among the northern aristocratic clans (*Shizu* / 士族); meanwhile, the aristocratic clans that had migrated south during the Six Dynasties of Jiangzuo (江左六朝), along with the local aristocratic clans that arose in the south, clearly had not completely vanished either, despite suffering massive blows during the Hou Jing Rebellion (侯景之乱). For instance, the Lanling Xiao clan (兰陵萧氏) still exerted considerable influence during the Sui and Tang periods.

This fact implies that, following a three-century historical process of inward migration and large-scale invasions by ethnic minorities since the Wei and Jin dynasties—although we cannot obtain specific proportional statistics today—agricultural real estate in China remained largely in the hands of the Han people, especially Han *landlords* (汉族地主). Land ownership had not undergone significant changes. This point in itself is extremely bizarre, as it clearly contradicts what happened in the rest of the world.

When backward peoples still in a state of clan-based tribalism lingered on the fringes of the civilized world, their productive and cultural levels would rapidly elevate through learning from advanced peoples (often the empire). Within a relatively short period, they would develop to the point where they urgently needed more land to establish ***relations of production*** (生产关系) fitting their current situation—namely, socio-economic relations under a ***feudal system***.

The answer to this question is obvious. When the Germanic peoples entered the Western Empire, they inevitably and ultimately had to turn the Romans' land into their own, with tribal leaders and subordinate chieftains of various ranks becoming the future emperors, kings, dukes, and marquises. The invasion of the ***Barbarians*** (蛮族) did not mean that all Roman landowners were completely supplanted. In fact, a portion of the late Roman lords of the **Manors** (庄园) who accepted the new ruling order gradually integrated into the **feudal nobility**, emerging as the **ruling elites** (统治精英) of the new regimes. The ***Barbarians*** did not create the feudal system solely out of a vacuum; rather, they integrated their own imperatives of rule with the **Manor system** within the empire, which already exhibited obvious ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征). Ultimately, after entering the empire, this synthesis evolved into a mature ***feudal system***. However, in any case, a massive restructuring of land property rights and their relations of domination was inevitable. Land was no longer primarily attached to the administrative system of the Roman state; instead, it began to be reorganized through military conquest, subinfeudation, and personal vassalage, vividly reflecting the new political order established by the conquering groups. This very point constitutes the most critical institutional foundation for Western European ***feudalization*** (封建化). Similarly, when the Turks, advancing from east to west, eventually began to encroach upon the Asian territories of the Eastern Empire, they inevitably established a Turkic **feudal order** in Asia Minor, which has culminated in the formation of the modern Turkish nation-state today.

On a global scale, the most typical example of conquerors seizing the territory of the conquered and transforming their own elites into ***feudal lords*** of various ranks over the newly acquired land is the Norman Conquest (诺曼征服) in the 11th century. Ten thousand Normans conquered England, which had a population of 1.5 million Anglo-Saxons (盎格鲁-撒克逊人). William the Conqueror (征服者威廉) mercilessly confiscated the land of the Anglo-Saxon nobility nationwide and enfeoffed it to the Norman nobles who had followed him from France, according to feudal relations. Consequently, across England as a whole, land ownership was transferred into the hands of the Norman conquerors. (Regarding the concept of land ownership during the ***feudal period*** (封建时期), I have provided an explanation in Section 30 of Chapter 12; those with questions may refer to it.)

Before his death, William I conducted another nationwide land survey—similar to what the Japanese refer to as *Kenchí* (检地)—and compiled the *Domesday Book* (《温彻斯特书》 / 《末日审判书》), supplemented by oath-taking assemblies, which ultimately massively strengthened the ***feudal system*** in England. The brilliance of referencing the Norman Conquest is that it provides a typical outcome of ***feudalization***, revealing the following fact: depriving the conquered of their land and enfeoffing it to the major and minor rulers among the conquerors according to feudal political relations is something that ***barbarians***—possessing the need for ***feudalization***—must do in order to adjust to the ***relations of production*** (生产关系) suited to their ***productive forces*** (生产力).

A massive question thus arises: since the behaviors of the Germanic peoples, Normans, Turks, Burmese, and Thai all followed this law, why did the *Five Barbarians* (五胡) active in Northern China fail to do so? Something unnoticed must have occurred here.

This doubt is immediately linked to another fascinating issue in Chinese history: the so-called question of "*Sinicization*" (汉化). Why is it that ethnic minorities from the north conquered the entirety of China twice, and conquered Northern China even more frequently, yet their cultures and lifestyles ultimately became almost completely Sinicized, leaving behind only minimal traces? Our official historiography similarly loves to propagandize this point, treating it as a symbol of the formidable power of Chinese culture.

However, simple mathematical deductions indicate that the reason is absolutely not as simple as it appears. Take William's conquest of England, for instance: he brought slightly over ten thousand Normans. When the national land survey concluded twenty years later, England had a population of 1.5 million. Considering his forceful purges of England, the number of Anglo-Saxons prior to the conquest was likely even higher. This means that William utilized less than 1% of the conquered population's manpower to accomplish the monumental task of consolidating the ***feudal system*** in the conquered territory.

In contrast, during the period when the inward migration of northern ethnic minorities into China reached its absolute peak—namely, the 4th and 5th centuries CE—even after prolonged and brutal wars, the Han Chinese population in Northern China still constituted the majority. However, the ratio of ***Barbarians*** to Han could absolutely not have been as low as 1%. Because even considering the population of a single ethnicity like the *Xianbei* (鲜卑), it numbered at least in the millions. The *Xiongnu* (匈奴) and *Qiang* (羌) had migrated inward long ago and lived intermingled with the Han for an extended period; their populations might have also been in the millions. In this light, even a conservative estimate would place the population of ethnic minorities (excluding the Han) in the northern regions at between 5 million and 10 million. Meanwhile, the Han population could absolutely not have reached the nine-digit mark (100 million)—an order of magnitude that was not achieved until the Song Dynasty.

From another perspective, the armed forces of the ethnic minorities during the Sixteen Kingdoms and the *Northern and Southern Dynasties* (十六国南北朝) were already highly advanced. Cataphracts (具装骑兵) became extremely common in Northern China. In fact, the technological gap between the ***Barbarians*** and the Han had already drastically narrowed; we can even argue that no generational gap (代差) in military technology existed between them.

Therefore, we can make the following assertion: for the ethnic minority conquerors sweeping across the north, it was by no means an impossible task—in terms of the balance of power—to feudalize Northern China and completely control it with their own tribesmen, just like their counterparts in other parts of the world. Since this is the case, why didn't the minority rulers in the north accomplish this?

A crucial line of thought perhaps lies in Karl Marx's proposition that "labor creates culture" (although not originally coined by him, Marx placed it at the core of his theory). Labor implies not only a specific mode of production and way of life, but also that laborers participate in a broad spectrum of social relations.

This proposition can be used to explain some fascinating topics. For instance, why do Jewish people always appear in the perceptions of other nations as the stereotype of merchants and bankers? Marx's viewpoint perfectly resolves this issue. It is absolutely not that Jewish people are significantly smarter than other nations, nor are they innately more adept at commerce and finance. Rather, because the Jewish people lost their state and wandered the world since before the Common Era, they always constituted a small minority within local ***communities*** and were politically disadvantaged. This resulted in a situation where, once a Jewish person actively participated in physical labor—for instance, becoming a farmer or a craftsman—he would become German in Germany, Russian in Russia, or British in Britain. It was precisely by engaging in non-productive professions (脱产的工作), occupying a marginal position in the social structure, and living within closed ***communities*** to perform jobs like money-lending, that a segment of the Jewish population was able to preserve their religion and culture.

Therefore, we can say it is not that Jewish people are inherently skilled at commerce and finance, but rather that only those who chose this profession in the past are still recognized as Jewish today, while the other Jewish people who labored directly using the means of production (生产资料) were assimilated locally. There are many such examples. The Armenians (亚美尼亚人), after the fall of their nation, also went into exile along the Silk Road; their perceived image is similarly one of adeptness in trade. The Chinese have intermittently migrated to ***Southeast Asia*** (东南亚) since the Song Dynasty; the image of ethnic Chinese among the indigenous peoples of ***Southeast Asia*** is practically identical to that of Jewish people in Europe—seen as shrewd, cunning, and even exacting. Again, this is not because Armenians and Chinese are genuinely just that clever, cunning, and adept at commerce, but simply because only such people could retain their original ethnic and

cultural characteristics, while the other immigrants gradually became indistinguishable from the natives.

India's Jainism (耆那教) is even more fascinating. Theologically, it possessed no way to compete among the masses against Buddhism and Hinduism, both born in India. However, the restrictions imposed by its doctrines ensured that its followers would not engage in agriculture or slaughtering, and thus the majority engaged in commerce and trade. This non-productive (脱产) lifestyle paradoxically guaranteed their detached status, allowing its followers—though appearing few within India's massive population—to consistently pass down their traditions.

The brilliance of Marx's viewpoint is that he utilizes a scientific theory to explain ethnic issues, rather than attributing them to some mystical, unverifiable "national character" (民族性). The prominent social status achieved by Jewish people globally today actually benefits from the fact that they secured an advantage in commerce and finance during the ***Late Middle Ages***, prior to the ***early modern period***. Two subsequent historical facts then provided them with the opportunity to skyrocket. First, the outcome of early modernization ultimately rendered capital (资本) the most critical *factor of production* (生产要素); thus, the Jewish people, having seized the early initiative, naturally enjoyed the advantage of being close to the source. Second, Europe achieved overwhelming dominance over the rest of the world during the process of modernization, allowing the Jewish people to ride this wave to the very top. Although this seemingly legendary process might have originally stemmed from Christian doctrines (such as the prohibition on usury)—which forced the Jewish people, as undesirables, to fill an indispensable "ecological niche" (生态位) to invigorate the social economy in the ***Late Middle Ages***—the rise of the Jewish people can indeed be explained by social science theories without resorting to theology.

Applying the same law in the opposite direction, we arrive at another fact: a nation occupying an advantageous position can expand its culture by controlling social production. England serves as a typical example here once again. Although the Normans constituted only a minuscule fraction of England's total population after the initial conquest, they genuinely seized control of the primary means of production in English society, especially land. It was precisely because they dominated social production that the Normans were able to impose their culture onto Anglo-Saxon English society with irresistible force. The immense influence that modern English received from French is absolutely incomparable to the impact any ethnic minority language had on Chinese after passing through the gates, including the Manchu language (满语).

In reality, not a single *feudalized* ***barbarian*** regime failed to firmly root its own culture into the newly conquered lands. A traveler visiting Germany in the 12th century could not possibly believe he was still in the ancient Roman Empire; a traveler visiting Turkey in the 17th century could not believe he was still in the Eastern Roman Empire; a traveler visiting eastern Thailand in the 18th century could not believe he was still in the Khmer Empire. It is precisely through the redistribution

of land—whereby conquerors firmly grasp land ownership and subsequently directly control and participate in social production—that the old culture can be swept away on a massive scale, thereby firmly consolidating their own rule. It is labor that creates new culture, and it is the dominance over social production that asserts and expands such new culture.

Therefore, without a doubt, we have now actually found the answer to the so-called question of "*Sinicization*" (汉化). The reason why the ethnic minorities that conquered China always seemed to vanish—like a bag of salt dissolving into a large pond—is absolutely not because Han culture possessed some magical, supernatural power. The fundamental reason lies in the fact that they abandoned ***feudalization*** (封建化). They did not directly control the land, nor did they directly participate in social production—which, of course, prior to the Industrial Revolution, primarily meant agricultural production. But if they did not undergo ***feudalization***, then what exactly did the minority rulers do? The answer is: *Bureaucratization* (官僚化).

2. The Compromise Between Ethnic Minority Rulers and Han Landlords

Now, imagine such a scenario: ethnic minority rulers drive deep into ***the Central Plains*** (***Zhongyuan*** / 中原). According to the needs of their social development, they would inevitably have to confiscate the land of the Han people and enfeoff it to their own tribesmen to establish feudal relations of subordination, thereby building a ***feudal system*** that matches their ***productive forces***.

However, this would inevitably bring about two massive difficulties. The first difficulty is how to confiscate land from countless Han landlords across the vastly expansive region of Northern China. Depriving Han landlords of all their *means of production* (生产资料) is actually tantamount to taking their lives. Foreseeably, doing so would inevitably cause the ***barbarian*** rulers to face staggering resistance throughout the entirety of Northern China. The ***barbarian*** armies would have to confront the hostility of a population numbering in the tens of millions across a colossal territory of nearly two million square kilometers. The force of this resistance would be vastly greater than what William encountered in merely one England.

The second disadvantageous factor facing the ***barbarian*** rulers in Northern China was that, south of Northern China, there existed the Southern Dynasties (南朝) regimes—established and dominated by the northern Han aristocratic clans (*Shizu* / 士族) who had migrated south since the Eastern Jin Dynasty (东晋). Because of its cultural and bloodline purity, this regime always positioned itself as the orthodox legitimacy (正统) and continuously attempted to exert influence over the Han people in the north.

The prolonged tug-of-war in the Jianghuai region (江淮之间) made it impossible for the North and South to determine a victor in the short term. Furthermore, beyond the southernmost parts of Southern China lay nothing but the ocean and, at the time, impenetrable jungles. This allowed the southern regimes to relatively concentrate their forces to deal with the northern threat.

This point significantly distinguishes the situation from that of Europe. After the division of the Roman Empire, although the Eastern Roman Empire also claimed Roman orthodox legitimacy, and monarchs like Justinian I (查士丁尼一世) still took the reconquest of the Western Empire as their duty, it is undeniable that Eastern Rome's energy was constantly pinned down by formidable enemies in the east—initially the Second Persian Empire, and subsequently the rising Arabs and Turks. The geopolitical situation facing Eastern Rome made it impossible for it to cast its gaze westward for long. Consequently, shortly after the end of Justinian's reconquest, the Lombards (伦巴第人) easily invaded Italy.

The situation in India shared a certain similarity with China. By the second millennium CE, although Turkic Muslims and Mongol Muslims could relatively easily rule Northern India, the Hindu regimes nestled among the plateaus and towering mountains of Southern India could practically never be completely conquered. This political pressure perhaps also impacted the ***feudalization*** (封建化) of Islamic regimes in India, somewhat making it easier for Hinduism to regain dominance over most of the South Asian subcontinent after the British India (英属印度) period.

Therefore, we can see that even for the ethnic minority rulers of Northern China from the 4th to the 6th centuries, eradicating all resistance in Northern China through military force to establish a feudal regime was not entirely impossible; however, it would inevitably face numerous challenges and highly likely could not be accomplished within a single generation. The risks involved in such an endeavor would be vastly greater.

Under these circumstances, let us hypothesize that the Han landlords—namely, the Han ruling class—offered a proposal of compromise. It demanded that the militarily superior ethnic minorities abandon the confiscation of land from the Han ruling class (the landlords) and refrain from establishing a feudal ruling order dominated by themselves. Instead, they would undergo *bureaucratization* (官僚化) according to the pre-existing bureaucratic political traditions of the Chinese Empire. In other words, the Khans and tribal chieftains would no longer transform into kings, grand dukes, marquises, and counts under a ***feudal system***, but would instead become the emperors and *the myriad officials of the state apparatus* (公卿百官) of traditional China.

In this way, in the short term, both sides saw immense benefits. For the Han landlords (primarily the great aristocratic clans / 大士族), they retained their land and continued to exert political influence as members of the ruling class. For the ethnic minority rulers, the political situation in Northern China could swiftly stabilize; they no longer needed to risk their lives on battlefields where swords have no eyes. Instead, they could live the lifestyle of Southern Dynasties aristocrats while still wielding massive power.

For the supreme ruler of the ethnic minority himself, there was one additional supreme benefit: the monarch within China's traditional bureaucratic system possessed considerable sacredness and far more absolute power—something absolutely incomparable to a king or emperor under a ***feudal system***, where the latter is merely the highest-ranking among ***feudal lords*** (封建领主). Simultaneously, formally adopting China's bureaucratic system helped dress up their regime to look more like an orthodox Chinese regime (正统的中国政权). Once this was combined with the fact that they had already conquered the ancient capitals of Northern China—where the Han people originated and grew powerful—the minority emperors gained even more confidence in proclaiming their status as the orthodox rulers of China, convinced that they held the advantage even when facing the Han regimes in the south.

The seventh emperor of the Northern Wei (北魏), Tuoba Hong (拓跋宏), posthumously known as Emperor Xiaowen (孝文帝)—who has been infinitely elevated in Chinese official historiography—was a resolute supporter and executor of this compromise. Although this compromise evidently existed before Emperor Xiaowen began his rule—for example, Cui Hao (崔浩), an illustrious minister hailing from the Qinghe Cui clan (清河崔氏), achieved an extremely high political status during the reign of Emperor Taiwu (太武帝). But until that time, the Xianbei (鲜卑) rulers remained in a state of hesitation regarding whether a complete compromise with the Han ***landlord class*** was necessary; Cui Hao himself was executed after enduring humiliation in the "National History Case" (国史案).

Emperor Xiaowen resolved to end this hesitation. He decided to implement complete *bureaucratization* to fortify his supreme power as an Emperor of China. He went so far as to relocate the capital against massive opposition and even executed his own Crown Prince.

Subsequently, following in the footsteps of Fu Jian (苻坚)—a previous ruler renowned as a minority emperor who respected Chinese traditions—he launched expeditions against the Southern Dynasties in an attempt to unify the entirety of China.

3. Emperor Xiaowen's Compromise Was Not a Success

Emperor Xiaowen was highly likely not the first to realize the possibility of such a compromise, nor was he, of course, the last ethnic minority monarch to make such a choice. Yet undeniably, the "***Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise***" (地主-官僚妥协) movement during his reign exerted the most colossal impact on the history of the entire East, due to its unique position in the long river of history. Simultaneously, driven by the "historical momentum" (时势) of the Xianbei nation at the end of the 5th century CE, Emperor Xiaowen's reforms produced highly dramatic consequences.

The most direct and obvious long-term consequence of bureaucratizing rather than feudalizing one's own nation is that the cultural characteristics of the ethnic minority inevitably and completely dissolve into the conquered nation. The reason is exactly as previously stated: since the conquerors abandoned control over the property rights of land (the core being ownership) within the empire's territory, and chose instead to transform into non-productive professional bureaucrats (脱产的职业官僚) who did not directly possess the means of production (生产资料), this lifestyle—divorced from social production—made it exceedingly difficult for the conquerors to create a new culture adapted to the new ***productive forces***.

On the other hand, because the conquerors occupied the politically dominant ruling position in the new society, it was impossible for them not to be deeply involved in state governance. This is fundamentally different from the Jewish people or Jains in the past, who were able to carefully preserve their characteristics on the margins of society. However, relative to the conquered Han people, the culture of the conquerors was too backward. Consequently, under the system post-compromise, if the conquerors wished to govern and pacify the state, they had no choice but to utilize Han culture, because they themselves were no longer capable of creating a culture fitting the circumstances.

The result of this dynamic was that the conquerors, unlike their counterparts in Europe, ***the Middle East*** (中东), and the Indochinese Peninsula, not only failed to elevate their relatively backward culture and root it into the newly conquered lands, but also degenerated within a short time to the point where they were indistinguishable from the Han people. Therefore, if we imagine the perspective of "Xianbei Nationalism" (鲜卑民族主义), Tuoba Hong (Emperor Xiaowen) is not merely a sinner and a traitor to the Xianbei in the short term; in the long term, his crime is monumentally greater, for he thoroughly annihilated the Xianbei nation.

But what is even more dramatic is that, although Emperor Xiaowen attempted to resolutely execute the policy of bureaucratization, in reality, for the Xianbei people, this was not something that could be accomplished so quickly. The reason is simple: there were already far too many Xianbei people in Northern China.

In fact, one can easily notice that ***barbarian*** incursions into an empire's territory are divided into two stages. During ***the zenith of a classical empire*** (古典帝国鼎盛时期), its territory and sphere of influence extended far beyond the settlements of the civilized nations, thereby incorporating frontier chieftains into the empire's (often indirect) jurisdiction. Thus, as the empire increasingly disintegrated during the process of ***feudalization***, the so-called ***barbarians*** who were the first to participate in this process were actually "naturalized" (归化) ethnic minorities who had long lived within the empire's borders. The chieftains of these minorities accepted the empire's investiture, held imperial official titles, and their soldiers fought for the empire like mercenaries; these things had been happening for one or two centuries.

On another note, while the civil society of the ***late-classical empire*** trended toward collapse—forcing the empire to rely on the support of ***barbarian*** soldiers and thus gradually acquiescing to ***barbarian migration into the empire's interior*** (古典帝国终结时期的蛮族内迁)—the empire inevitably did not lose control overnight. Therefore, it could still restrict the scale of this inward migration and adopt advantageous methods to resettle the migrating tribes. This meant that a substantial portion of the members among the naturalized ***barbarians*** already had a lifestyle indistinguishable from that of the empire's citizens, while those members who still remained in a clan-tribal state and possessed a powerful need for ***feudalization*** were relatively too few.

Thus, following the disintegration of the empire, within the first wave of ethnic minority invasions, these already semi-imperialized ***barbarians*** were neither psychologically inclined to completely discard the old imperial system—to the extent of viewing it as ***Chonggang Junfu / Towering Mountains*** (重冈俊阜)—in favor of a more thorough ***feudal system***, nor were they capable of doing so in terms of the balance of power. Their tribal armies were indeed too small to suppress the resistance of the demographically dominant native inhabitants of the original empire.

Consequently, the first batch of minority regimes established upon the corpse of the empire often adopted the attitude of a "paperhanger" (裱糊匠), positioning themselves as the orthodox successors to the empire and striving their utmost to maintain the classical system that was already unsustainable. In China, the Han regime (汉政权) established by the Xiongnu chieftain Liu Yuan (刘渊) in the 4th century CE, and Fu Jian (苻坚)—the Di (氐族) chieftain and ruler of the Former Qin Dynasty (前秦) who unified Northern China—are highly typical examples.

Those truly capable of realizing the enterprise of ***feudalization*** (封建化) were the second wave of ***barbarians*** who followed closely behind. They rapidly approached the empire's borders, possessing a relatively more backward culture and less contact with the empire, yet their numbers were vastly larger. This batch of ***barbarians*** did not harbor the identification with the imperial system seen in the first wave of naturalized ***barbarians***. However, during their movement toward civilized regions, they elevated their ***productive forces*** to a level approaching the early stages of ***feudalization***, which

endowed them with an intense thirst for land. They would utilize their superior military force to drive deep into the territory, forcefully confiscating land from the remnants of the empire and the previously entered ***barbarians***, allowing their own tribesmen to firmly control this newly emerged, most crucial means of production (生产资料).

In China, the Xianbei (鲜卑) seemed inherently tasked with such a historical mission. The situation after the fall of the Roman Empire was similar. Perry Anderson, in his work *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (《从古代到封建主义的过渡》), also argued that ***feudalization*** in the Western Empire occurred twice according to the aforementioned typology.

It is precisely because the Xianbei were too numerous, their demand for ***feudalization*** (i.e., for land) was too vigorous, and they completely lacked a sense of identification with the Chinese bureaucratic system, that Emperor Xiaowen's "*bureaucratization*" (官僚化) measures were destined to cater only to an extremely small minority of the Xianbei upper echelon. From the very beginning, these measures severely betrayed the overall interests of the Xianbei nation, inciting extreme anger among the vast majority of lower-class Xianbei—who remained in a state of neither being *feudalized* nor bureaucratized, and were not even agriculturally settled.

Consequently, less than 30 years after the relocation of the capital to Luoyang (洛阳), massive rebellions erupted in the *Six Frontier Garrisons* (六镇) of Northern Wei, stationed by these Xianbei who felt profoundly betrayed. This interval is astonishingly short. Even calculating at 16 years per generation, 30 years is less than two generations. By comparison, even after enduring the severe destruction inflicted upon Soviet society during the Stalin era, the Soviet Union survived for 38 years after Stalin's death. This somewhat illustrates that Emperor Xiaowen's reforms could not possibly have been as successful as official historiography claims.

4. After the Uprising of the Six Frontier Garrisons, China's Feudalization Process Reached Its Zenith

With the "second southward descent" of the Xianbei people, the ***degree of feudalization*** (封建化程度) in Northern China reached its historical zenith, which was naturally true from a nationwide perspective as well. This high ***degree of feudalization*** was most concentratedly reflected in the process of military confrontation between the Western Wei and Eastern Wei regimes.

Gao Huan (高欢), as the paramount minister of Eastern Wei and the founder of the Northern Qi regime, always exudes a highly unique and rare personal charisma in Chinese historical narratives. However, once we discard this particularized "Great Man theory of history" (英雄史观) and view him instead as one of the primary political leaders and participants during the ***zenith of China's***

feudalization (中国封建化的顶点), it is not difficult to realize that what ultimately determined his behavior was not his personality, but the social reality of that era.

For example, in the Battle of Shayuan (沙苑之战) and its associated military operations, Gao Huan suffered a disastrous defeat against Yuwen Tai (宇文泰). Consequently, he decided to resign from the post of Chancellor (Chengxiang / 丞相). Despite Emperor Xiaojing, Yuan Shanjian (孝静帝元善见) urging him to stay, Gao Huan resolutely resigned the chancellorship. When Chinese historiography explains this event, it often considers it primarily from the perspective of Gao Huan's personal character.

Yet, we can easily observe a fundamental political principle: the strength or weakness of political power solely concerns the nature of its source of power, and has absolutely nothing to do with empty titles.

We can consider two earlier examples. Cao Cao (曹操), the founder of the Cao Wei regime, certainly suffered no shortage of defeats in his lifetime. In hindsight, his defeats at Chibi (Red Cliffs) and Hanzhong altered the geopolitical landscape under heaven; yet, even following such disastrous defeats, he did not resign his chancellorship. This was because a substantial portion of Cao Cao's ruling power derived from the signboard of being the Chancellor of the Han Empire. The position of Han Chancellor enabled him to recruit more aristocratic clans (Shizu / 士族) to serve him, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of his rule and gaining a moral advantage over his enemies.

Shortly thereafter, however, Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮), the Chancellor of the Shu Han regime, resolutely resigned his chancellorship after the failure of his first Northern Expedition (北伐). Upon careful consideration of this matter, we will find that Zhuge Liang was absolutely not throwing in the towel; rather, he believed that the source of his power had nothing to do with the office of Chancellor itself.

The reason Zhuge Liang was able to monopolize state administration—especially possessing the final say in personnel matters—was fundamentally derived from the deathbed entrustment (Tuogu / 托孤) by the late Emperor Liu Bei. Secondarily, it stemmed from his undisputed status as the leader of the Jingzhou literati residing in Shu after the loss of Jingzhou itself. Since this was the case, resigning the chancellorship would neither affect his actual power (as he continued to "execute the duties of the Chancellor") nor impact the grand enterprise of the Northern Expeditions. Thus, there was no reason not to put on such a political performance.

When we observe Gao Huan himself, the situation differs from the other two. As Chancellor, Gao Huan actually lived apart from Emperor Xiaojing; the emperor resided in Ye (邺城), while Gao Huan was based in Jinyang (晋阳). At first glance, this situation somewhat resembles the dynamic between the Japanese Emperor's court and the Shogunate (幕府) established by the samurai. But upon closer inspection, the resemblance is even more striking.

An important piece of evidence is his establishment of the "Emigrant Provinces" (Qiaozhou / 侨州). Once Gao Huan finalized Jinyang as his residence, he quickly settled the Xianbei clans who had moved south from the Six Garrisons into the Shanxi region, organizing them into "Emigrant Provinces" that reported directly to him rather than being under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Wei court. In reality, these became the "Tenryō" (天领 - Shogunal Demesne) of the "Shogun."

Furthermore, Gao Huan's key generals—for instance, the most famous among them, Hou Jing (侯景)—not only guarded specific regions for long periods but also possessed their own tribal retinues. In fact, if we acknowledge that Gao Huan was not merely the Chancellor of the Eastern Wei regime, but also the supreme ***feudal lord*** (最高封建领主) recognized by his similarly *feudalized* (封建化的) subordinate generals, then the office of Chancellor had absolutely nothing to do with the source of his power.

This is much like how a Shogun who dominates the realm could, of course, accept the title of Minister of the Left (Sadaijin / 左大臣) within the Japanese imperial system. But even if he did not hold that post and was merely a Middle Captain of the Right Guards (Ukonoe no Chūjō / 右近卫中将), who would dare refuse to acknowledge his power? Precisely because the position of Chancellor itself was equivalent to a court office held by a Shogun—having no bearing on the source of his power—Gao Huan naturally possessed the conditions to make such a political gesture.

More direct and abundant evidence is reflected in the military campaigns between Eastern Wei and Western Wei. If we were to view the armies of these two states as imperial forces uniformly provisioned with pay and rations by the court—much like the armed forces of China before or after this period—we would inevitably find some behaviors of the people at that time utterly bizarre. However, if we view them as coalition armies summoned by ***feudal lords*** according to feudal obligations—much like certain military campaigns in the European ***Middle Ages***—then many issues make perfect sense.

Precisely because under a ***feudal system*** (封建制度), even the supreme lord lacks the absolute power of a despotic monarch (专制君主)—being merely the highest-ranking among lords—his subordinate lords have greater confidence to say: "Our interests are not the same as yours." Within a ***feudal system***, for a king under an emperor's rule, he certainly does not always wish for the emperor to win battles, because the expansion of the emperor's power and influence is highly likely to threaten his own fiefdom. Interestingly, after Gao Huan's army achieved a decisive victory over Yuwen Tai at the Battle of Mangshan (邙山之战), the situation indeed presented an opportunity to strike directly into Guanzhong to unify the North. Yet, his generals expressed opposition, causing the victory to slip away just like that.

At the same time, the unfolding of pitched battles was heavily imbued with ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征). It might initially begin as mutual probing between border lords of the two countries, escalating into military actions. Subsequently, the respective supreme lords would enter the fray leading their direct troops and summon other regional lords subordinate to them to dispatch troops in assistance, ultimately evolving into an all-out war. Gao Ang (高昂) and Hou Jing's siege of Dugu Xin (独孤信), which triggered a massive battle between Yuwen Tai and Gao Huan, serves as an excellent example (the Battle of Heqiao / 河桥之战, 538 CE).

During other periods in China, it is extremely difficult to imagine that generals of a centralized state's court—even frontier generals—could possess such massive autonomy and interact with the central government in such a manner. This similarly explains why Gao Huan always pardoned generals who committed severe blunders, such as Gao Yongle and Peng Le. Once we recognize that these subordinate generals of Gao Huan essentially possessed the characteristics of ***feudal lords***, it becomes very easy to understand that it was absolutely impossible for him to easily remove his vassals (封臣) like a despotic monarch. Because this is not merely a matter of retracting power granted by the central government to an individual; it would also incite severe suspicion among his other vassals.

A final, highly fascinating example is that, although Gao Huan himself held command in Jinyang, his legitimate eldest son Gao Cheng (高澄) acted as the "Grand Commander of the Capital Region" (京畿大都督) in Ye to surveil the court. This situation strongly calls to mind the political landscape of the early Kamakura Shogunate (镰仓幕府) in Japan. When Hōjō Yoshitoki (北条义时) monopolized power in Kamakura as the Regent (Shikken / 执权) of the Shogunate, he similarly had his heir, Hōjō Yasutoki (北条泰时), serve as the Rokuhara Tandai (六波罗探题) in Kyoto to surveil the imperial court on behalf of the Shogunate.

This astonishing similarity not only further implies the possibility of the existence of a "Gao Shogunate" (高氏幕府) back then, but also perhaps reveals a commonality in ***early feudal politics*** influenced by the Chinese system.

In reality, there is an overwhelming abundance of evidence in the historical records of this period supporting the fact that Northern China had already undergone intense ***feudalization*** (封建化) following the uprising of the Six Frontier Garrisons. Beyond political behavior, people's political concepts were also severely impacted.

Take the standard procedure of usurpation by paramount ministers in China as an example. There are ten extant "Edicts of the Nine Bestowals" (Jiuxi Wen / 九锡文) preserved in our country's history. With the exception of the one where Emperor Wen of Wei, Cao Pi (魏文帝曹丕) enfeoffed Sun Quan (孙权) as the King of Wu, the other nine bestowals of the Nine Honors were all preparatory steps prior to usurpation by a paramount minister.

Under the ideology of a Chinese ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家), if the emperor were to directly hand over the Mandate of Heaven to the usurper via formal abdication (Shanrang / 禅让), it would appear extremely abrupt to the people. Therefore, the Edicts of the Nine Bestowals served a specific function: before usurping the throne, the paramount minister first obtained partial co-rulership of the realm through a legitimate method.

The writing requirements for the Edicts of the Nine Bestowals reflected this by following a general rule: first narrating the severe hardships facing the state's destiny, and then emphasizing the military achievements of the paramount minister in "saving and sustaining the state" (Kuangfu Sheji / 匡扶社稷). After the emperor expressed deep shame in the face of the minister's monumental merits, he would grant the minister a portion of the state's territory—usually ten to thirty commanderies (Jun / 郡)—enfeoff the minister as a Duke or King with hereditary fiefdoms, and grant a series of ceremonial privileges.

The ideology behind this was the concept of "King's Land, King's People" (王土-王民). Even though China nominally recognized the private ownership of land since the Qin dynasty, the concept of private property under a bureaucratic system (官僚体制) was destined to be extremely fragile. From the emperor's perspective, the land of his subjects was still his own land; there was no reason it absolutely could not be reclaimed. Therefore, even if a paramount minister was already de facto ruling the state, he still needed a legal procedure to first become the owner of a portion of the realm, and subsequently the owner of the entire realm. The Edicts of the Nine Bestowals for Cao

Cao, Sima Zhao, Liu Yu, Xiao Daocheng, Xiao Yan, Chen Baxian, Yang Jian, and Li Yuan all contained content regarding the granting of fiefdoms.

The sole exception is the edict wherein Emperor Wenxuan of Northern Qi, Gao Yang (北齐文宣皇帝高洋), received the Nine Bestowals from Emperor Xiaojing, Yuan Shanjian (孝静帝元善见), which contained no mention of granting a fiefdom. This phenomenon highly likely reflects the development of *feudalized* consciousness in Eastern Wei society. If the emperor himself was no longer viewed as the owner of all land under heaven, and rulers of different ranks could all possess their own hereditary territories, then there was indeed no need to specifically emphasize the granting of fiefdoms in the Edict of the Nine Bestowals. The Gao family's regime in Jinyang was perhaps already universally regarded as a feudal shogunate back then, to the point that everyone felt it unnecessary to make a superfluous move to affirm the legitimacy of the Gao family's land ownership.

The *Book of Wei* (《魏书》) is a biographical dynastic history compiled by the historian Wei Shou (魏收) after the establishment of Northern Qi, recording nearly two centuries of history of the Northern Wei Dynasty (including Eastern Wei). Precisely because no scholar can escape the influence of their era, the Book of Wei actually leaves behind an extremely fascinating perspective for later generations, allowing us to observe Northern Qi society from a specific angle.

For instance, the Book of Wei does not consider Southern Qi (南齐) and Southern Liang (南梁) to be two separate regimes; rather, it views them as a single regime that first called itself "Qi" and later, after an internal imperial strife, called itself "Liang." This perspective reflects a *feudalized* consciousness—namely, "who rules which land." Wei Shou believed that since Xiao Yan (萧衍) also belonged to the Lanling Xiao clan (兰陵萧氏), the fact that the Xiao clan ruled Southern China had not changed (though, from the Northern dynasties' perspective, it was an illegal rule, naturally). Thus, it inherently remained merely another phase of the "Xiao Dynasty."

During the Hou Jing Rebellion (侯景之乱), when Gao Cheng (高澄) decided to seize the opportunity to launch an expedition against the South, Murong Shaozong (慕容绍宗) drafted a call to arms (Xiwen / 檄文) for him, bluntly stating: "Since the pseudo-Jin, the Liu and Xiao have wrought chaos." He claimed that Xiao Yan was not only a usurping, rebellious minister, but because Southern Qi and Southern Liang belonged to the same royal house, Xiao Yan was also a thief who slaughtered his own kin and corrupted human morality (all found within the *Biography of the Island Barbarian Xiao Yan* / 《岛夷萧衍传》).

This understanding vastly differs from how later Chinese viewed the Southern Dynasties. In the eyes of the Chinese Empire under a bureaucratic system, no matter how hypocritical the abdication was, Xiao Yan indeed received the Mandate of Heaven and legal orthodoxy from Xiao Baorong (萧宝融) through a formally legal process, established a new dynastic title, and changed the era name. Therefore, Liang and Qi were naturally two completely different dynasties; it was merely that their rulers both hailed from the Lanling Xiao clan.

In contrast, in ***medieval*** Europe, people naturally divided dynasties based on families according to feudal consciousness. Although it was all the Holy Roman Empire, rule by different families divided it into different dynasties; the same view applied to Byzantium. Therefore, an observer can easily discover how massive a discrepancy this is compared to the transition between Qi and Liang—where the ruling family remained unchanged yet later generations viewed them as two separate dynasties. One can also sense exactly which side the perspective of northern intellectuals leaned toward during the Wei-Qi period. As for other evidence, it will not be further detailed here.

5. The Ultimate Failure of China's feudalization

Since China's ***feudalization*** (封建化) had reached such an extent, why did it not continue to deepen as it did in Europe, but instead shortly pivoted onto the path of *re-bureaucratization* (再官僚化), eventually forming the Sui and Tang empires?

Looking at the surface-level situation, it was because the rulers—despite undergoing a certain ***degree of feudalization***—never abandoned the pursuit of becoming true despotic monarchs. If we compare the situations in Guandong (关东) and Guanxi (关西), it is not difficult to discover that the Eastern Wei-Northern Qi in Guandong was in a more advantageous position for ***feudalization*** than the Western Wei-Northern Zhou in Guanxi. This was not only because Guandong possessed economic and demographic superiority and housed the vast majority of the north's *feudalized* aristocratic great clans (大士族), but also because Gao Huan evidently inherited far more of the military forces from the Six Garrisons than Yuwen Tai did, which meant the former had an even more intense need for ***feudalization***.

Therefore, the Western Wei-Northern Zhou regime was swiftly able to establish a new bureaucratic politics under the banner of restoring antiquity (as discussed in *A Study on the Nine-Rank System of Personnel Selection* / 《九品官人法研究》), and ultimately restored the absolute authority of the monarch on this foundation.

In Guandong, however, the political inclinations of the brothers Gao Cheng (高澄) and Gao Yang (高洋) formed a dramatic contrast with Hōjō Yasutoki (北条泰时). While playing the identical role of surveilling the nominal supreme ruler on behalf of the feudal shogunate, Hōjō Yasutoki was well

aware that he was the spokesperson for the Shogunate, defending the interests of the Shogunate and the samurai (武士). But the Gao brothers did not stand on the side of Jinyang; instead, they strengthened the court's authority in Ye (邺城) and intended to ultimately replace "China's Emperor" (equivalent to the Japanese Tennō)—namely, Emperor Xiaojing, Yuan Shanjian—to position themselves at the absolute apex of bureaucratic rule.

This also explains the most dramatic historical event at the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties: Hou Jing's (侯景) two rebellions in Eastern Wei and Southern Liang. There is reason to believe that Hou Jing, as the great lord holding autocratic control over Henan and the number one vassal of the Gao Shogunate, could not possibly have been oblivious to what was happening in Jinyang and Ye. He naturally deduced, based on Gao Cheng's past behavior, that Gao would inevitably not tolerate a powerful ***feudal lord*** (封建领主) like himself, making it imperative to preemptively launch a rebellion.

In reality, for Hou Jing to have acquired such colossal power, he certainly could not have been a fool, and historical records do not view him as a fool either. For a ***feudal lord***, there is no logical reason to rebel simply because his liege lord underwent a normal generational succession. Even in the loosely structured Holy Roman Empire, the princes would not, in the vast majority of cases, rebel simply because a new emperor was crowned. As long as the relationship of feudal obligations remained unchanged and the guarantee of his original fiefdom (*honryō ando* / 本领安堵) was not violated, what profit motive would a vassal have to undertake such highly risky behavior?

Meanwhile, since Gao Huan—as the dominator of this brief period of dual polity (二元政治)—tacitly approved of Gao Cheng's actions in Ye, it is evident that he himself was not inclined to maintain the dual rule of the Shogunate and the Court. Naturally, he knew that further bureaucratization after Gao Cheng took power would shake the trust of the subordinate lords. Thus, he easily "predicted Hou Jing's prediction" (预判了侯景的预判).

In this way, we provide a rational explanation for Hou Jing's initial rebellion based on standpoint and profit motive, rather than resorting to morality and personal character.

Returning to the main topic, the move by Gao Huan's descendants to decide to become the emperors of China rather than the supreme lord of their vassals was, of course, a success. Gao Yang accepted the abdication from Yuan Shanjian and established the Northern Qi (北齐) regime.

However, such success was so incomplete, because the feudal shogunate in Jinyang could not possibly vanish overnight, and the *feudalized* (封建化的) Xianbei warriors remained the military backbone of the court. This being the case, the contradiction between Ye and Jinyang inevitably led

to turbulence in the court. The third emperor of Northern Qi, Emperor Xiaozhao, Gao Yan (孝昭帝高演), launched a coup d'état relying on supporters from Jinyang. He ascended the throne and ruled there, and only after his death was his coffin transported to Ye for burial.

Another extremely important political figure, Gao Huan's wife Lou Zhaojun (娄昭君), similarly and evidently favored Jinyang while distancing herself from Ye. When Gao Yang was preparing to force Emperor Xiaojing to abdicate, Lou Zhaojun, as a mother, expressed resolute opposition, so much so that Gao Yang had to postpone it. Ten years later, Lou Zhaojun supported her son Gao Yan in deposing her grandson Gao Yin (*Book of Northern Qi, Biographies 1* / 《北齐书列传第一》).

Under this situation, suspicion, doubt, and conspiracy ran rampant in the Northern Qi court, making its political chaos even worse than that of Northern Zhou. Unlike the dictatorial power of Yuwen Hu (宇文护) in Northern Zhou, which basically maintained the rule of the Yuwen clan, the internal chaos in Northern Qi plunged the state into severe internal friction. Numerous illustrious ministers and renowned generals died unjustly, and its national power was drastically diminished.

The result of such a developing situation was that, although Northern Qi initially held an obvious advantage over Northern Zhou in national strength, it was ultimately Northern Zhou that swallowed and destroyed Northern Qi, effectively ending the Gao family's rule in Guandong. Regardless of the Gao family's fate, the destruction of the original ***feudalization*** (封建化) process in Northern China is an obvious fact. And just like that, the most critical historical window of opportunity for the Chinese people was lost.

When the Sui and Tang rulers re-embraced bureaucratic politics, they absolutely did not simply want to return to the zenith of the Han dynasty, nor could they possibly do so.

After six centuries of economic development and social transformation, the era characterized primarily by strong personal dependency (人身依附), where the direct enslavement of the labor force served as the primary mode of exploitation, had long faded. Although the institution of slavery still existed in various forms within society, it was no longer the primary characteristic of society.

In reality, no matter how politics fluctuated at the middle and upper echelons, in the vast rural areas of the empire, the exploitation method based on rent and taxes ultimately became mainstream due to its higher efficiency. The ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) emerged and dominated the social production of the empire. Economic ***feudalization*** had already occurred, and it became a major challenge to the ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** (复辟官僚帝国).

Here, the reader ought to note a specific issue: regarding "rent/taxes as the ***mainstream mode of exploitation***" (租税为主流剥削方式) as a pivotal or even the paramount characteristic of a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) constitutes a highly classical historical perspective of Marxist-Leninist states; this assertion is obviously not entirely correct. Furthermore, the relatively early transition of Chinese society toward land rent as the primary mode of exploitation during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) was identically, by no means, entirely the consequence of a conventional ***feudalization*** (封建化) process. I have conducted a phenomenally detailed discourse regarding the pertinent issues within the explanation of the **"*Mainstream mode of exploitation*"** (主流剥削方式) entry in Section 30, Chapter 12 of this text; readers may refer to it at their own discretion.

6, The Success of the Restoration-Bureaucratic System

In the late 6th and early 7th centuries CE, the rulers of the empire possessed a clear historical memory of China's prolonged division and fragmentation since the end of the Jin Dynasty. Even if they could not recognize it from a scientific perspective, they could determine through intuition and experience that in order to maintain the absolute authority of the monarch, they must find ways to suppress the still-existing *aristocratic great clans* (门阀士族).

Fortunately for the rulers, technological advancements not only allowed ***feudalization*** (封建化) to deepen but could equally be utilized by the emperor. Among these, papermaking and woodblock printing played a particularly monumental role. Thus, besides continuing to employ administrative power to weaken the economic strength and political influence of the *aristocratic great clans*, the empire was able to take a decisive step in the system of official selection: the implementation of the Imperial Examination (*Keju* / 科举).

For the monarch, the *Keju* powerfully weakened the ability of the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) to translate its economic status into political status, curbing the formation of a unified *class interests coalition* (阶级利益共同体). The *Keju* would completely terminate the influence caused by elite lineage politics since the Han and Wei dynasties, centralizing personnel power into the hands of the central government, especially the emperor, thereby enhancing the extractive capacity of the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家).

Beyond direct political and economic benefits, by transforming intellectuals into "disciples of the Son of Heaven" (天子门生), the emperor would create a public opinion environment far more favorable to himself and detrimental to the aristocratic clans. By determining the content of the *Keju*

examinations and promoting officially sanctioned doctrines, the ***bureaucratic state***'s ideological control over the entire society was unprecedentedly strengthened.

Therefore, a specific event is recorded in the *Tang Zhiyan* (《唐摭言》): when Emperor Taizong, Li Shimin (太宗皇帝李世民), saw the successful candidates of the imperial examination marching out in single file from the Duanmen Gate, he joyfully remarked to his attendants, *"The heroes under heaven have entered my net"* (天下英雄入吾彀中矣). Viewed from today, 1400 years later, Li Shimin was indeed qualified to express such a sigh of triumph, because from then on, China embarked on a path untrodden by any other nation.

Of course, the aftershocks of the ethnic minority conquests would still ripple for a century. Although the most turbulent wave of ***feudalization*** was blocked by the breakwater of the bureaucratic system, as long as the *feudal mode of production* (封建生产方式) remained mainstream in the empire, the ***landlord class***'s assault on the bureaucratic system could not completely cease.

Beginning with the An Lushan Rebellion (安史之乱), *feudalized Fanzhen* (藩镇 - regional military commands) emerged in the Hebei region, engaging in *de facto* warlord separatism. Comparing the regions controlled by the *Fanzhen* with the regions subjected to wealth extraction by the court, the lives of the common people in the former were paradoxically more stable. Not only were the frequency and intensity of peasant uprisings lower, but archaeological evidence also supports that the people's average lifespan was longer.

However, it must be pointed out that the ***feudalization*** primarily manifested by the *Fanzhen* during the middle and late Tang Dynasty could not remotely compare in intensity to that of the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern and Southern Dynasties. This is reflected not only in the fact that the *Fanzhen* nominally remained subordinate to the Tang Empire—possessing the ability to defend themselves for a period but lacking the capacity to conquer the realm.

More importantly, the *Fanzhen* of the Tang Dynasty could not form stable feudal relations. In particular, the core military force of the *Fanzhen*, the *Yabing* (牙兵 - headquarters guards), did not provide military service based on being granted land as a reward. This caused the *Fanzhen* themselves to be exceptionally unstable, especially during succession. Realistically speaking, the conscription system universally implemented by the *Fanzhen* was identical to the court's—a mercenary/recruitment system (募兵制). Naturally, it was impossible to establish a stable lord-vassal system like a true feudal regime.

Although the *Fanzhen* of the middle and late Tang and the Five Dynasties could be said to contain certain ***feudalization*** factors, they were still a far cry from feudal regimes. Thus, the counterattack

of the ***bureaucratic state*** was an unstoppable inevitability. From the Tang to the Five Dynasties, perhaps only the notorious traitor in Chinese history, Shi Jingtang(石敬瑭), was subjectively willing to adopt certain measures that were in fact conducive to ***feudalization*** (though he may not have pursued these actions with ***feudalization*** as his explicit goal). These included relaxing the state's control over the economy, allowing merchants to question whether taxation was rational and legal, lifting the state monopoly on salt and iron, and so on. However, he was still unable to resolve the critical issue of establishing a stable feudal hierarchical order. Consequently, his benevolent policies ultimately proved to be nothing more than a fleeting flash in the pan.

The restoration of the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) was ultimately completed by the Song Empire. The most crucial historical roles were played by the founding emperor, Song Taizu (Zhao Kuangyin), and his younger brother, Taizong (Zhao Guangyi).

After a century of slaughter during the late Tang and Five Dynasties, factors favorable to the ***bureaucratic state*** were increasing. One such factor was the relative decrease of *un-feudalized* ***barbarians*** within ***Handi*** (***China Proper*** / 汉地)—having become indistinguishable from the Han people after bureaucratization, or having been annihilated in wars. History from five centuries prior had already demonstrated that these ***tribal groups*** themselves were a crucial factor promoting ***feudalization*** (封建化).

Although the Song rulers could not comprehend the ***feudalization*** process from a scientific perspective, they discovered through historical experience that peripheral ***barbarian*** nations always seemed to be destroying China's inherent system. The Song Dynasty consistently maintained a cautious distance from the ***barbarians***, even expressing an extreme lack of interest in the former territories of the Han and Tang dynasties, harboring a certain pride in its own purity.

Additionally, the economic development of the South and the Grand Canal also favored the court's rule. The Song rulers could easily note from the history of previous eras that when Northern China fell into severe *Fanzhen* (warlord) separatism, the court in Chang'an relied entirely on the tax revenues of the Jiangnan provinces to sustain itself. During the more than half-century of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (which can be traced back to the An Lushan Rebellion), the economy of Southern China underwent further development, while the North became relatively weakened due to the ravages of war.

The unique geographical environment of the South placed the court in an extremely advantageous position. Ever since the Qin and Han empires first conquered this vast region, the Han people continuously strengthened their local control through wars of expulsion against the Baiyue (and other ethnic groups), a process that lasted until China's final dynasty, the Qing. Although such armed pioneering would spawn a certain degree of feudal organization—in fact, even today, the lineage clans (宗族) of Southern China are far beyond comparison with the highly atomized (原子

化) northern plains. However, the newly pioneered territories in the South lacked large, contiguous plains and were divided by hilly and mountainous terrain. Thus, it was difficult to form relatively concentrated political forces like the samurai in Japan's Kantō region, and consequently, they were always kept under the court's control.

By the final stage of the empire, ***Late Imperial China*** (中华帝国晚期), relatively obvious regional divisions of labor had emerged nationwide. This vastly differed from the situation during the first millennium CE, where regional political and economic centers overlapped; the unified ***bureaucratic state*** thereby became more consolidated.

Therefore, we can deduce that during the Song Dynasty, the rulers certainly realized that extracting social wealth from the South via the Grand Canal would consolidate central finances, thereby giving them the spare capacity to eradicate the influence of the Five Dynasties' *Fanzhen*. This also suffices to explain why Song Taizu resolutely established the capital in Kaifeng. It was obviously not a matter of "*relying on virtue rather than geographic defenses*" (在德不在险); rather, it was a manifestation of the Song rulers consistently placing the priority of internal stability far above foreign relations. Ending the aftershocks of ***feudalization*** following prolonged chaos was the paramount task, rather than considering the not-yet-imminent threats from foreign nations.

Of course, aside from these favorable factors, the Song rulers further exerted their subjective agency. They enhanced the role of the imperial examination in the selection and appointment of officials and expanded their ***co-optation*** (收买) of the ***landlord class***. Consequently, by the Song Dynasty, the *aristocratic great clans* (门阀世家) that had formed since the Eastern Han essentially vanished.

The Song Empire's outstanding fiscal extractive capacity (财政汲取能力) also enabled the court to provision an exceptionally massive standing army. Today, we should no longer believe that when the Song rulers created this army, they expected it to defeat the elite forces of foreign nations. Instead, there is ample reason to believe that the primary mission of this army was to maintain the internal stability of the empire.

For instance, the Song Dynasty's bloated and unwieldy army absorbed massive numbers of vagrants (流民). Left unchecked, these vagrants would either foment rebellions or be absorbed by major landlords in various regions—both outcomes would challenge the unquestionable power of the court. If these unemployed and propertyless young men were all conscripted into the army, it practically eliminated a colossal risk for the court. This is highly analogous to the massive army maintained by North Korea today. Rather than taking South Korea as its hypothetical enemy, North Korea's colossal ground force is better understood as taking the over 20 million North Korean people as its hypothetical enemy; its sole significance is merely to maintain the rule of the Kim family.

Emperor Taizong, Zhao Guangyi, went a step further. As soon as he annihilated Northern Han, he ended the very concept of "local officials" by abolishing the *Jiedushi* (Military Commissioners) holding actual power. From then on (for the vast majority of periods), officials in various localities of the Chinese Empire were essentially central metropolitan officials (京官), whose promotion, demotion, appointment, and dismissal depended entirely on the court.

The political reforms of the Song Dynasty were so successful that, over the recent millennium, rebellions by China's "local officials" became exceedingly rare compared to the previous millennium, and the bureaucratic system was never again subjected to any forceful challenge by ***feudalization***.

The dynasties that existed alongside or followed the Song—namely, the Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing—generally speaking, all further intensified bureaucratic rule, thereby strengthening the personal despotic power of the emperor. Of course, this did not occur without any fluctuations. When ethnic minorities ***Entered the pass*** (***Ru Guan*** / 入关), they would initially carry certain ***feudalization*** (封建化) characteristics to some extent. However, no matter the ethnicity, they all engaged in varying degrees of the "***Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise***" (地主-官僚妥协), and none attempted to establish a feudal ruling order dominated by themselves within China's borders.

Just like that, in the first few days of October, I provided a new explanation for a crucial issue in the prolonged history of the Chinese Empire. This explanation is more scientific than any other theory I had previously known, yet thus far, there remain far too many unresolved questions. Therefore, I decided to press on while the iron was hot.

On the final day of the National Day holiday, I shared these discoveries with my closest friend, H. H expressed his trust in me; he not only believed that the "troubleshooting the circuit" process aligned with the scientific spirit, but also claimed that the most invaluable aspect of this new explanation was its abandonment of unverifiable moral inferences. Instead, reasoning through class standpoint and profit motive possesses universality and can be tested against historical events in other spatiotemporal contexts.

In the past, our country's historiography always tended to resort to morality to explain certain monumental events—for instance, asserting that a certain monarch had a guilty conscience, a certain minister possessed noble virtues, or a certain class was inherently despicable. This not only deviates from the materialist conception of history but lacks any *falsifiability* (可证伪性) whatsoever, to the point that it can hardly be considered science.

A typical example is the Rebellion of the Eight Princes (八王之乱) in the Western Jin dynasty and the subsequent *chaos caused by the Five Barbarians* (五胡乱华). This is invariably blamed on the

low legitimacy, corrupted morals, and low intelligence of the Sima clan's rulers. Even a slightly more rational explanation is limited to seeing it merely as an overcorrection of the Cao Wei regime's policy regarding imperial clansmen.

However, once we observe from the perspective of global history as a whole, we can clearly realize that the collapse of ***classical empires*** and invasions by ethnic minorities were universal social phenomena occurring across the Eurasian continent—stretching from the British Isles all the way to ***Korea*** (朝鮮)—and were re-enacted almost ten centuries later on the Indochinese Peninsula.

And as Newton taught us, universal phenomena demand universal explanations. It was precisely my trust in scientific principles that enabled me to instantly recognize the absurdity and ridiculousness of those old theories. This is also why, although this perspective is not yet comprehensive, I remain intuitively full of confidence in it. I believe that by adhering to the scientific spirit, scientific principles, and scientific methods, I will inevitably reach a place no predecessor has ever reached, and behold a magnificent landscape no predecessor has ever seen.

Chapter 2: Why China's Bureaucratic System Was So Formidable Amidst the Wave of Feudalization

The reflections of the previous stage, while solving a considerable number of problems, also brought about some new ones. Intuition tells me that the known results and the unknown questions are all parts of a larger truth. However, before seeing the full picture, I cannot determine the interrelationships between these parts. Therefore, the best choice is presumably to tackle the easy before the hard. I decided to first attempt to answer what is, for me, the simplest question: namely, why, even though China was not the only one to experience the period of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国时期), ***the Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise*** (地主-官僚妥协) ultimately only caused a reversal of the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process in China?

In my preliminary explorations in early October, I had already provided two explanations:

First, the area and population of Northern China were far too massive, and the difficulty of governing a state cannot possibly scale linearly with the growth of population and area. Using ten times the number of ***barbarians*** (蛮族) to control ten times the area and ten times the number of conquered people is obviously not as simple as when none of these three figures are multiplied by ten.

This forms a highly distinct contrast with the situation of the Western Roman Empire. Although the population and territory of the Western Empire were also astonishing, we can easily notice that in reality, various branches of ***barbarians*** entering the Roman territory each controlled a specific portion of the Western Empire. This is vastly different from the Xianbei rulers facing the entirety of Northern China in the 5th century CE; consequently, the pressure they experienced was absolutely incomparable.

Second, unlike the Eastern Roman Empire, which had to divert massive energy into confronting Persia and the Arabs, the Five Dynasties of Jiangzuo (江左五朝) faced no threats from their rear, thus allowing them to strategically direct their full force northward.

The distribution of ethnicities, cultures, and religions within its borders was also far more homogeneous than in the Eastern Empire. The Han people still held absolute dominance in the South. Therefore, if we assume that the reunification of North and South did not occur at the end of the 6th century but persisted for much longer, there is actually considerable reason to believe that the Jiangzuo regimes could have maintained the image of "half of the Chinese Empire" for quite a long time. They would not have increasingly become an empire of the Greeks like the Eastern Empire, nor would they have developed a "Southern Orthodox School" of Confucianism. *(This is a joking expression, as the Orthodox Church of Byzantium ultimately split from the Catholic Church in Rome and became increasingly characterized by Greek traits.)*

Thus, the Southern Dynasties regimes would bring far greater military and political pressure upon the northern ethnic minority rulers. These two factors undoubtedly made the northern minority rulers more resistant to implementing ***feudalization*** policies in the north through heavy-handed measures, making them more inclined to reach a compromise with the Han landlords.

But if one were to believe that this is sufficient, they would lose the scientific spirit of seeking truth. Some well-known histories of our country demonstrate that although the ***"Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise"*** (地主一官僚妥协) concentratedly manifested during the eras when ethnic minorities dominated ***the Central Plains***, its embryonic form emerged much earlier.

A highly representative piece of evidence is that Emperor Wen of Wei, Cao Pi (魏文帝曹丕), having just received the Mandate of Heaven from the Han, adopted the proposal of the Prefect of the Masters of Writing, Chen Qun (尚书令陈群), to establish and implement the Nine-Rank System (*Jiupin Zhongzheng Zhi* / 九品中正制). Although this system underwent several transformations and cannot be equated across different historical periods, it nevertheless profoundly influenced China for several centuries, only exiting the historical stage when the imperial examination (*Keju*) system gradually matured.

Facing the overarching historical trend since the Eastern Han Dynasty—the rise of powerful magnates evolving into elite lineages (门阀), and the resurgence of feudal relations within the empire—the Nine-Rank System indeed proposed the first internal solution for the empire. It was a solution that attempted to incorporate the increasingly powerful ***feudal landlords*** (封建地主) into the *bureaucratic system* (官僚体制) by granting them a procedural pathway to control state power.

The prolonged chaos since the end of the Jin Dynasty completely fails to obscure the success of this scheme. Even during the Eastern Jin—the era when the aristocratic clans reached their absolute zenith—the emerging ***landlord class*** could always find a point of equilibrium within the bureaucratic system and cautiously coexist with imperial power.

The issue worth noting is that when Cao Pi implemented the Nine-Rank System in Northern China, although the migration of ethnic minorities into ***Handi*** (***China Proper*** / 汉地) had already been underway for a long time, it was still nearly a century away from the massive invasion by the ***barbarians*** (蛮族).

This implies that, setting aside one party to the compromise—namely, the ethnic minorities entering ***the Central Plains***—China's original *bureaucratic system* itself had already demonstrated far stronger adaptability and resilience than the bureaucratic systems of the rest of the ***classical empires***

(古典帝国) in the world. In other words, before the ethnic minorities conquered Northern China, China's bureaucratic system was already exceptionally formidable.

It is precisely this realization that demands we trace further back into history, to examine exactly what exceptional circumstances occurred when the imperial system was initially established. As briefly mentioned before, the unification by the Qin Dynasty was simply too brief and unpopular, so much so that its influence has consistently been vastly overestimated. Therefore, the focus of our observation is placed on the era when the Chinese Empire was truly forged: the Western Han Empire.

So, regarding its bureaucratic system, what distinguished China's ***classical empire*** during the Western Han period from other ***classical empires***? In reality, apart from Rome, we can currently hardly know with certainty the exact modes of political operation of these ***classical states***. For Persia, India, and the Khmer, their political systems must largely be deduced through fragmentary records.

Under such conditions, the exceptional nature of the Western Han system becomes particularly glaring. Not only did it possess a massive number of bureaucrats appointed top-down, but most astonishingly, in an era before the Common Era, China already possessed a nationwide official selection system—namely, the *Chaju* (察举 / recommendation) and *Zhengbi* (征辟 / conscription) systems. This system was guided by an official ideology recognized by the entire society, possessed relatively clear regulations and operational procedures, and was strictly controlled by the court.

This set of systems for selecting, promoting, demoting, appointing, and dismissing officials clearly distinguished Han China from other ***classical empires***. The Han bureaucratic system possessed a certain capacity for self-replenishment and self-repair, without the need to rely entirely on the emperor's intervention.

We can imagine that in ***classical states*** lacking such a system, who served as regional governors or court chancellors depended more on where the emperor wished to dispatch his cronies, rather than on a systematized procedure. Undoubtedly, this very characteristic of the Han bureaucratic system was the source of its strength and resilience when the wave of ***feudalization*** arrived.

This system was not established in a single day. It ultimately finalized only after over a century of prolonged development during the Western Han Dynasty. The monarch who played the greatest role in this was undoubtedly Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝). So, what exact factors catalyzed this transformation?

I believe the critical factors are twofold. First, the sudden outbreak of high-intensity natural disasters during Emperor Wu's reign; and second, the staggering scale of the counterattack-expansion wars. It was precisely because the Han Empire was forced to simultaneously tackle these

two severe challenges, both internally and externally, that the necessity arose to elevate state capacity to a level considered extremely anomalous for that era. The personal aptitude of Liu Che (刘彻 / Emperor Wu) made this possible.

1. Natural Disasters May Have Played a Certain Role

The debate regarding how the climate of the Han Dynasty compares to contemporary times has no definitive answer to this day. Initially, Mr. Zhu Kezhen (竺可桢) believed that the Western Han belonged to a warm period, with the climate only beginning to turn cold during the Eastern Han. However, many scholars later questioned this, arguing that the Western Han actually existed in a relatively cold period, with temperatures likely not much different from today.

Regardless, the *Book of Han* (《汉书》) indeed records several natural disaster events caused by severe cold during the reign of Emperor Wu (occurring in the 4th year of Yuanguang, the 1st year of Yuanshuo, and the 2nd and 3rd years of Yuanding), proving that the climate back then was far from mild.

Yet, the even more severe disasters were floods. During the 54 years of Emperor Wu's rule, the Yellow River flooded and breached its dikes, causing disasters to the extent that it partially changed course twice—a situation that persisted for over a generation. In the 3rd year of Jianyuan, *"the river waters overflowed onto the plains, causing a great famine where people ate each other"* (河水溢于平原，大饥，人相食). In the 3rd year of Yuanguang, *"in the spring of the third year, the river waters shifted, flowing southeast from Dunqiu into the Bohai Sea"* (三年春，河水徙，从顿丘东南流入渤海), and *"the river waters breached at Puyang, inundating sixteen commanderies"* (河水决濮阳，泛郡十六). In the 2nd year of Yuanfeng, the breach at Huzi was blocked, but *"after blocking the Xuanfang breach, the river again breached northward at Guantao, splitting into the Tunshi River"* (自塞宣房后，河复北决于馆陶，分为屯氏河).

Unlike the final millennium of the empire, when the economic center had already shifted to Southern China, the unprecedented flooding of the Yellow River—unseen since the time of Yu the Great—during the Western Han period directly struck the most populous and economically developed regions of the empire. It caused monumental destruction to social production. Therefore, the pressure brought to the Western Han court by frequent floods vastly exceeded the concerns of the monarchs in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, who worried more about refugees threatening political security or whether canal transport might be interrupted.

In fact, we can easily observe that to cope with the staggering destruction of the floods, the empire adopted a series of unprecedented measures, which demanded a historically unprecedented

strengthening of the state's administrative power. First, controlling the floods inherently required conscripting massive numbers of soldiers to fill the breaches. To deal with the Yellow River breach in the 3rd year of Yuanguang, 100,000 soldiers were mobilized. When Emperor Wu personally visited the Yellow River breach in the 2nd year of Yuanfeng to ultimately block the breach at Huzi, tens of thousands of soldiers alone were deployed.

Secondly, the floods caused massive numbers of people in the Guandong region to become destitute, homeless, and devoid of food and clothing. The number of refugees was colossally massive relative to the Han Empire's total population of over 30 million. The highest recorded figure was in the 4th year of Yuanfeng, noting *"2 million refugees in Guandong, and 400,000 without registered names/numbers"* (关东流民 200 万口，无名数者 40 万) (*Biographies of the Wan Shi and Zhang Shu in the Book of Han* / 《万石张叔列传》). In the 4th year of Yuanshou, there were also over 700,000 refugees in Guandong (*Treatise on the Balanced Standard* / 《平准书》).

To cope with disasters of such intensity, the empire, on one hand, needed to requisition grain from relatively abundant regions to provide relief to the disaster zones. For example, in the autumn of the 3rd year of Yuanding (September), because the Jiangnan region suffered from floods, Emperor Wu worried that the people would be unable to survive the winter hunger and cold, and thus dispatched grain from the Bashu region for disaster relief (*Basic Annals of Emperor Wu* / 《武帝本纪》).

On the other hand, it was necessary to arrange for these refugees to migrate to places with arable land. The destinations were mostly frontier commanderies in the empire's northwest, such as Longxi, Beidi, and Shangjun, as well as newly conquered territories, thereby simultaneously achieving the goal of consolidating border defenses (实边). The sheer scale of migration during Emperor Wu's reign was staggering. In the winter of the 4th year of Yuanshou, impoverished people from Guandong relocated to Longxi, Beidi, Xihe, Shangjun, and Kuaiji totaled 725,000 individuals (关东贫民迁徙到陇西、北地、西河、上郡、会稽总共 725000 口) (*Basic Annals of Emperor Wu* / 《武帝本纪》).

During the Yuanfeng era, when the expansionary wars were at their most intense, the empire further *"newly established the Zhangye and Jiuquan commanderies, while agricultural officials were set up in Shangjun, Shuofang, Xihe, and Hexi, deploying 600,000 border-defense soldiers to garrison and farm there"* (初置张掖、酒泉郡，而上郡、朔方、西河、河西开田官，斥塞卒 60 万戍田之) (*Treatise on the Balanced Standard* / 《平准书》). Earlier, in the summer of the 2nd year of Yuanshuo, they also *"recruited 100,000 people to relocate to Shuofang"* (募民徙朔方十万口)

(*Basic Annals* / 《本纪》). Migrations involving fewer than 100,000 people are not counted here due to scattered records (such as those in the *Biographies of the Xiongnu* / 《匈奴列传》).

Because the unified Han Empire vastly exceeded the vassal states of the Warring States period in both population and territory, the difficulty and cost of dispensing grain and relocating people were absolutely incomparable to what King Hui of Liang did back then when he *"moved his people [or grain] to Hedong, and moved his grain [or people] to Henei"* (移其民（粟）于河东，移其粟（民）于河内).

Even more notably, relocating the refugees from Guandong into the newly conquered commanderies and counties in the northwest meant their route would pass right through the vital capital region of Guanzhong (关中京畿重地). Consequently, the court had to invest considerable effort into political security. The *Treatise on the Balanced Standard* (《平准书》) records: *"Emissaries divided them into sections to escort them, with official carriages in continuous sight"* (使者分部护之，冠盖相望), and ultimately, *"the expenses were counted in the hundreds of millions and were beyond calculation. Consequently, the state treasury became utterly depleted"* (其费以亿记，不可胜数。于是县官大空).

At other times, the migration of people was combined with the transportation of grain. The *Treatise on the Balanced Standard* also records that when the region east of the mountains (Shandong/Guandong) suffered severe disasters—where people cannibalized each other across an area of one to two thousand *li*—Emperor Wu issued an edict allowing the starving masses to travel south toward the Jianghuai region to seek sustenance. If they wished to remain locally, they could do so, while the court simultaneously dispatched grain from the Bashu region in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River for disaster relief.

Thirdly, to cope with the colossal destruction inflicted by natural disasters on social production, the empire's emphasis on agricultural production similarly reached an unprecedented level. For example, in the 3rd year of Yuanshou, the court *"dispatched emissaries to instruct the commanderies that had suffered floods to plant winter wheat"* (遣谒者却有水灾郡种宿麦) (*Basic Annals* / 《本纪》).

During Emperor Wu's reign, the majority of the water conservancy projects of both Han dynasties were completed. The court explored the latest technologies such as the *Jingqu* method (井渠法 / karez well-canal system), dispatched court officials to improve farming methods, popularized the production of crops beneficial for famine preparation (winter wheat and soybeans), and vastly

improved agricultural tools. Even when compiling the new calendar during the Taichu era, the solar terms (节气) were concurrently established to guide agricultural production.

Given the incredibly high expectations people at the time placed on improving agricultural efficiency, it is hard not to view this as a reaction to the mercilessness of natural disasters. And these government-led missions demanded the expansion of state power.

Finally, precisely because of the frequency and uncertainty of natural disasters, the court became increasingly inclined to strengthen macroeconomic control to hedge against the severe impacts of famine years (especially the loss of independent peasant-proprietors caused by land annexation). Once this combined with the ballooning fiscal expenditures brought about by wars and disaster relief, the *Pingzhun Junshu* (平准均输 / Equitable Delivery and Balanced Standard system) was born; it even became the very symbol of the expansion of state power in the Han Dynasty. Aside from floods, the records concerning droughts during Emperor Wu's reign are even more numerous than those of floods (though this does not mean droughts were more severe than floods, as the floods were practically in a continuous state because the Yellow River breaches remained unblocked), and locust plagues were also highly common.

Today, we can still discern from Han dynasty historical records the intense psychological reactions of the people back then to these frequent and severe natural disasters. During the Western Han period, there existed an Ancestral Temple System (宗庙制度). Beginning with Emperor Wen, the temples of successive emperors each had a specific title (a sort of name). For instance, Emperor Wen's temple was named *Gucheng* (顾成 - Fulfilling Success), Emperor Jing's was *Deyang* (德阳 - Radiant Virtue), Emperor Xuan's was *Leyou* (乐游 - Joyous Excursion), and Emperor Yuan's was *Changshou* (长寿 - Longevity). All of these were names signifying auspiciousness, peace, and joy.

However, Emperor Wu's temple was named **"Longyuan"** (龙渊 - Dragon Abyss). The *Basic Annals of Emperor Wu* (《武帝纪》) links the construction of the Longyuan Palace with the Yellow River breaching at Puyang in the 4th year of Yuanguang, for which 100,000 soldiers were conscripted to block the breach.

Although today people still cannot know for certain exactly how many "Longyuan Palaces" existed back then—whether there was only the temple of Emperor Wu in the Guanzhong region as recorded in the *Sanfu Huangtu* (《三辅黄图》 / *Illustrated Guide to the Three Capital Regions*), or whether there was another Longyuan Palace near the Yellow River breach intended to pray for the subsidence of the floods, much like the later Xuanfang Palace (宣房宫).

Nevertheless, my judgment remains that, whether or not there was a "Longyuan Palace" beside the Yellow River in Henan, the naming and construction of "Longyuan Palace" are highly unlikely to be unrelated to the flooding and breaching of the Yellow River.

The first reason is that when Ban Gu (班固) compiled the *Book of Han*, it had only been two centuries since Emperor Wu's time. Massive remnants of Western Han architecture still existed then, making it not so easy to mistakenly link two entirely unrelated events. The second reason is that the recorded temple names of other Western Han emperors mostly carried images of auspiciousness and blessings. It is highly unlikely that Emperor Wu's temple alone was named after some mere decorative ornament (i.e., a "bronze flying dragon").

Therefore, I believe that the name "Longyuan" should have served the exact same function as the temple names of other Western Han emperors: praying for blessings. It is simply that what Emperor Wu considered here was not his personal fortune, but the hope that the Yellow River floods would finally subside.

The *Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices* (《封禅书》) records that when Emperor Wu heavily favored the alchemist (方士) Luan Da (栾大), Luan Da fraudulently claimed that his master had once said: *"Gold can be transmuted, the Yellow River breaches can be blocked, the elixir of immortality can be obtained, and one can attain the Dao and ascend as an immortal"* (黄金可以变，黄河决口可以堵塞，不死之药可以获得，也可以得道升仙).

However, Emperor Wu—a monarch who has historically been viewed as deeply superstitious regarding alchemy and occult arts—made no mention of alchemy, elixirs of immortality, or methods for ascending to immortality in his edict enfeoffing Luan Da as the Marquis of Letong (乐通侯). He only left behind a record expressing immense anxiety over the fact that the Yellow River was experiencing such ceaseless and severe flooding for the first time since the flood-taming of Yu the Great, harboring the hope that an extraordinary figure like Luan Da could genuinely resolve this crisis.

Of course, this is not to say that Emperor Wu merely pinned his hopes on alchemists when facing natural disasters. We already know that he indeed adopted measures unprecedented by his predecessors, and the results were obvious: despite such severe internal woes, the empire achieved strategic dominance in the war against the Xiongnu through massive and protracted campaigns, doubling the size of its territory. But Emperor Wu was, after all, a man from over two millennia ago. Even people today turn to religion for psychological comfort when facing uncontrollable problems; it was perfectly normal for someone back then—even a hero—to seek psychological solace from the unknowable.

The intellectuals of the empire were equally profoundly concerned about the disasters. Sima Qian (司马迁), the author of the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》), is a quintessential representative. Although he personally disagreed with many of the empire's policies, his sincere yearning for a peaceful realm still radiates between the lines.

The *Treatise on Rivers and Canals* (《河渠书》), as one of the Eight Treatises of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, concentratively chronicles the immense efforts people back then invested into combating floods. Even after the tragic event that occurred between him and the emperor in his later years, when Sima Qian recorded the felling of the bamboo in the Qi Garden (伐淇园竹) to block the Xuanfang breach—an event he personally experienced while following the Feng and Shan sacrifice procession—he adopted a highly praiseful and nostalgic tone. He believed that although Emperor Wu's reign saw countless investments and numerous accomplishments in water conservancy, *"yet the most prominent among them was at Xuanfang"* (然其著者在宣房), and he completely transcribed the *Song of Huzi* (《瓠子歌》) composed by Emperor Wu.

He stated bluntly: *"I followed to carry firewood on my back to block the Xuanfang breach, and mourning the Song of Huzi, I composed the Treatise on Rivers and Canals"* (余从负薪塞宣房，悲瓠子之诗而作河渠书). The *Treatise on Rivers and Canals* thus became the only chapter in the *Records of the Grand Historian*—other than the Grand Historian's own preface—where he explicitly explained why he wrote it. One can well imagine the status that flood control held in Sima Qian's heart.

"Those in power vied to speak of water conservancy" (用事者争言水利). This did not only refer to intellectuals serving as officials in the court or localities; it equally included intellectuals out of office. The *Treatise on Ditches and Moats* in the *Book of Han* (《汉书 沟洫志》) records exactly such a *"person offering convenient advice"* (言便宜者)—a man named Yan Nian (延年) from the Qi region. He submitted a memorial to Emperor Wu suggesting that, according to maps and topographic inspections, the Yellow River should be diverted to flow toward Mongolia, entering the sea eastward from a much more northern position. This way, Guandong would never suffer from floods again, and the North would not have to worry about the Xiongnu because the Yellow River waters would serve as a natural barrier. Consequently, countless expenditures of money and manpower could be saved.

Facing a suggestion that bordered on the fantastical even by the standards of that era, the emperor himself probably felt caught between tears and laughter. Yet, not wishing to crush such unadorned, patriotic sentiment concerning state affairs, he could only reject it by deflecting, stating that the Yellow River's channel was opened by Yu the Great, and he possessed no qualifications to alter it.

2, The Characteristics of the Expansionary Wars During the Western Han Period

Playing an even greater role than natural disasters were the wars. It is not difficult to discover that the foreign wars during Emperor Wu's reign possessed the following characteristics:

First, the operational range of the Han army was staggeringly vast. Today's Ulaanbaatar (乌兰巴托) in Mongolia (near the original location of the Chanyu's Court / 单于庭) and Hue (顺化) in Vietnam (the southernmost point of the Western Han expansion) are basically situated on the same meridian, yet they are separated by 3,500 kilometers north to south. Fergana (费尔干纳) in ***Central Asia*** (the location of the Dayuan state / 大宛国) and the eastern coast of ***Korea*** (the easternmost point of the Western Han expansion) are essentially on the same latitude, separated by 4,700 kilometers east to west.

Across such a colossal territorial expanse, the environments and inhabited ethnic groups were wildly disparate. Such military achievements were scarcely imaginable over two millennia ago. Among all empires prior to the ***modern era*** (现代), only the conquest range of the Mongol Empire could surpass it; Rome and the Han Dynasty operated on the same level.

Second, predicated upon the already massive operational range of the Han army, another notable point is that many of the territories conquered by the Han forces were regions Chinese armies had never before set foot in, and were not even discovered and recognized by the Chinese until the era of Emperor Wu.

This implies that the Han Empire's expansion closely followed the footsteps of geographical discovery, sometimes even conquering first and discovering later. This characteristic clearly distinguishes it from many great empires, particularly Rome. Today, we realize that although the territories conquered by the Romans were vast, the majority of the territories during Rome's zenith were already known in previous eras. Ancient Greeks certainly knew of the Levant, Egypt, North Africa, Mesopotamia, and Spain, and even had some understanding of Britain; the Romans themselves had knowledge of Gaul before conquering it. Before Alexander conquered Persia, the Greeks and Persians had interacted for nearly two centuries. Even for the earlier Persian Empire, the civilizations of ***the Near East*** (近东) possessed considerable mutual understanding; Assyria, at least, was jointly annihilated by Babylon and Media.

This was even more true for the Mongols. Before the Mongol Empire conquered the vast regions of the Eurasian continent, trade networks connecting the entire continent had existed for over a millennium, various religions were widely disseminated within them, and more than one conqueror had rampaged between East and West. Therefore, when the Mongols decided to conquer a regime, they could entirely gather sufficient information through intelligence reconnaissance before taking action.

It is precisely under this contrast that the rapid military expansion of the Han Empire appears especially exceptional: it simultaneously possessed the dual natures of conquest and exploration.

This nature of *"Zhaokong"* (凿空 - Piercing the Void) is highly similar to the expansion of European nations during the Age of Discovery.

Third, after conquering new frontiers, the Han Empire frequently carried out migrations on an unprecedented scale. As previously mentioned, the number of such migrants recorded in official histories alone was no less than 1.5 million. In fact, in the 2nd century BCE, government-led population relocation on such a scale was a historical first.

Migrating to the frontiers enabled the empire to swiftly control the newly conquered regions and anchor the institutional systems of the interior (内地) locally. Consequently, within a very short time, the conquered territories transformed into launching pads for new conquests. This forged a distinct difference from those empires that merely sought loose control, or lacked sufficient populations of their own ethnicity to migrate, satisfying themselves merely with the conquered peoples acknowledging their suzerainty.

Fourth, the fruits of conquest were also extremely astonishing by the standards of the time.

The expanded territories included most of Gansu, Ningxia, the Hehuang region (河湟地区), most of Inner Mongolia, Guizhou, parts of the Sichuan region, most of Yunnan, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, north-central Vietnam, and north-central ***Korea***. Emperor Wu similarly established effective military deterrence and presence in the Xinjiang region; Xinjiang being incorporated into the Chinese map was merely one kick away. The vast majority of these newly conquered territories remain within China's borders today, and although Vietnam and ***Korea*** later became independent, they were consistently and strongly influenced by China.

Beyond these regions that can be considered direct territory, after achieving strategic initiative in counterattacking the Xiongnu (匈奴), Emperor Wu significantly crossed the Qin Great Wall to establish a massive military early-warning and defense system much further north, which simultaneously existed as a fulcrum for offensives. Further north, penetrating deep into the Xiongnu heartland of Mobei (漠北 / north of the Gobi Desert), there were Han military strongholds thrusting in like sharp knives—these were the Outer Great Walls (外长城) and the network of fortresses beyond the frontiers (塞外列城).

Modern archaeological work has already discovered several former Western Han military fortresses in the upper reaches of the Kherlen River (克鲁伦河) in today's Töv Province (中央省) of Mongolia; some were continuously used until the Liao and Jin dynasties. These fortresses were a mere hundred kilometers from the Chanyu's Court prior to the Battle of Mobei, which is exceedingly close for cavalry.

Obviously, it was precisely these military strongholds established after the decisive victory in Mobei that forced the Xiongnu during the mid-reign of Emperor Wu to relocate their ruling center westward—from the highly optimal environment of Ulaanbaatar to the vicinity of the later Uliastai (乌里雅苏台). Although this retreat forced the Han army to march significantly longer distances into the Gobi Desert during the next phase of operations—thus frequently suffering defeats—the Xiongnu's own power was drastically weakened as their operational range was massively reduced, ultimately leading to their fragmentation.

Maintaining a military presence in the heart of Mongolia is a feat whose extraordinary nature can only be appreciated when combined with China's own history. After the Western Han, the next dynasty capable of maintaining a military presence garrisoned by court armies on the Mongolian Plateau was the Liao Dynasty (辽朝)—a regime established by the Khitans (契丹) that occupied merely a small fraction of China's ***Handi*** in the north; yet its dynastic history is also regarded as one of the Twenty-Four Histories.

Moreover, the Liao people's strategy for ruling Mobei was exactly identical to that of the Han Dynasty: similarly tracing the Kherlen River westward from the east, building cities and garrisoning them, extending west until today's central region of Mongolia west of Ulaanbaatar (seemingly slightly deeper than the Han period), because this was a region with a well-developed water system in the upper reaches of the Selenge River (色楞格河). The one after that was the Qing Empire (清帝国), which entirely ruled Khalkha Mongolia (喀尔喀蒙古) by relying on outstanding political maneuvers and the utilization of technological advancements; but the Qing Dynasty was similarly a regime established by an ethnic minority.

However, this military presence, which appeared far too ahead of its time, indeed imposed a heavy burden on state finances. During the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han (汉宣帝), the Han Dynasty's ultimate victory in this century-long war against the Xiongnu had become a foregone conclusion. Consequently, the military defense lines were massively withdrawn southward, and the network of fortresses beyond the frontiers subsequently ceased to be held by the Han court.

Fifth, the multi-tiered, elongated border defense system in Northern China and the Mongolian region during the mid-Western Han reveals a major characteristic of the war against the Xiongnu. Namely, under the premise of an extremely vast operational range, the "single front" (单一战线) of the war against the Xiongnu was also horrifyingly long. *(Of course, this could not be a front line of close contact between two armies like in modern warfare, but it was indeed a line where combat could erupt at any point, with both sides existing in a prolonged state of war).*

Currently, it is believed that the Han Great Wall (the Outer Great Wall constructed during Emperor Wu's reign), extending all the way from northern ***Korea*** to the border of Xinjiang and Gansu, had a

total length exceeding 10,000 kilometers. Considering that some areas did not face the threat of the Xiongnu (such as Liaodong), that the Great Wall was divided into inner and outer lines in many sections, and that military fortresses existed beyond the Wall, the actual length of the control line where the Han Empire and the Xiongnu engaged in confrontation was considerably shorter.

But even so, during the 40 years from the mid-reign of Emperor Wu to Emperor Xuan's retraction of the defense lines, there existed a military confrontation line of at least 3,000 kilometers between the Han and the Xiongnu, located far away (800 to 900 kilometers) from the Han capital of Chang'an (长安). *(Outside the Han border defense system, wars between the Han and the Xiongnu would also erupt in places with only a small, scattered Han military presence, such as in Xinjiang).* And the war never ceased.

The straight-line distance between the western and eastern ends of this front exceeded 2,000 kilometers, which is longer than the straight-line distance from Berlin to Moscow. The length of the military confrontation line was also longer than the front line between the two nations in the Soviet-German War (苏德战争), and it lasted far longer. Such an elongated military confrontation line required million-level military personnel to garrison. No matter how much the borderlands were reclaimed and utilized, they could not possibly achieve self-sufficiency. Therefore, this inevitably imposed a colossal burden on state finances.

In reality, from the perspective of China's entire history, the number of Han Chinese population in the northern frontier regions of the Western Han was indeed anomalously large. One can easily realize this simply from the number and density of administrative divisions in that region. Along the Inner Mongolian section of the Han Great Wall, after the end of the Western Han, the number of Han residents did not surpass the Western Han level until after the "Zou Xikou" (走西口 / Westward Migration beyond the Great Wall) during the Qing Dynasty—which was nearly 2,000 years after the Han-Xiongnu War.

Sixth, the scale of the war was unprecedented, especially considering the ratio of the participating population to the total population of the Han Dynasty.

During Emperor Wu's reign, the military forces committed against the Xiongnu—including field armies and border defense forces—recorded in historical texts approached 2 million person-times (200 万人次). The number of people serving the war logistically could only be far greater. The troops the empire committed within a short timeframe were even more staggering. In the five years from 112 BCE to 108 BCE, the Han army successively deployed troops across five strategic directions: Nanyue (南越 / southeast), Western Qiang (西羌 / west), Eastern Yue (东越 / southeast), Xiongnu (匈奴 / north), Southwestern Barbarians (西南夷 / southwest), and Joseon (朝鲜 / northeast).

Except for the Xiongnu Chanyu who dared not engage in battle, the other five directions were all conquered. During these five years, nearly 1.5 million troops were deployed. This meant that 5% of the nation's total population directly participated in military operations—a feat unimaginable for an agricultural empire two millennia ago.

Setting aside civil wars during periods of division, it was not until the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (抗日战争) in the last century that China's military mobilization rate (军事动员率) surpassed that of the Han-Xiongnu War for the first time. *(If we calculate based on the population within China's legal territory at the time, it might not even match the Western Han. However, considering that the War of Resistance was a defensive war and a massive portion of China's population was in Japanese-occupied zones, the mobilization rate of the population actually controlled by the Nationalist Government was indeed higher than that of the Han era. Furthermore, during Emperor Wu's reign, the Chinese army was accustomed to fighting outside its borders and turning those foreign lands into new territories).*

Merely considering the troops deployed by the Han army in a single campaign is astonishing enough. For example, in the campaign to conquer Joseon, the General of the Towered Ships, Yang Pu (楼船将军杨仆), led 50,000 troops from Shandong across the Bohai Sea to land in Joseon. In the entirety of ancient China, there was never another cross-sea military operation that achieved its campaign objectives with a troop strength surpassing the Han's war to annihilate Joseon. The next successful cross-sea campaign exceeding this troop strength was the Liberation of Hainan Island (解放海南岛), over 2,000 years later.

(The *Zizhi Tongjian* / 《资治通鉴》 claims that Su Dingfang [苏定方] led an army of 100,000 from Weihai across the sea, landing at the mouth of the Ungjin River [熊津江口] to unite with Silla [新罗] and annihilate Baekje [百济]. However, neither the Biography of Su Dingfang nor the Biographies of the *Eastern Barbarians* (东夷) in the *Old Book of Tang* [《旧唐书》] contains records of troop strength, and the same absence occurs in the *New Book of Tang* [《新唐书》]. Later, when China and Japan fought at the Battle of Baekgang [白江口作战], it is explicitly recorded that 7,000 reinforcements were dispatched from Shandong. Based on the context of Tang troop deployments before and after this event, there is ample reason to believe that the record of 100,000 troops lacks any factual basis.)

Even before the navy was capable of undertaking cross-sea operations, Emperor Wu had already attached extreme importance to the inland river navy, to the extent of excavating the Kunming Pool (昆明池) south of Chang'an specifically to train naval forces. In the war to subjugate Nanyue (南

越), the emperor *"ordered the Yue people and a tower-ship force of 100,000 from south of the Jianghuai to go forth and suppress it"* (令粤人及江淮以南楼船十万师往讨之).

After conquering the two Yue regions (Nanyue and Dongyue), the Chinese Empire had incorporated all territories reachable by inland river navigation into its own borders. From then on, aside from battles that decided the fate of the realm during times of chaos—like the Battle of Lake Poyang (鄱阳湖大战)—the court no longer needed, nor was it possible, to build such a colossal inland river navy again.

The same held true for military operations in the North. Twenty years after the decisive Battle of Mobei, the Han Dynasty once again dispatched Li Guangli (李广利) and others to lead an army of 210,000 on a northern expedition against the Xiongnu. The troop strength even exceeded that of the Battle of Mobei *(however, the number of cavalry decreased, and the vast majority deployed this time were infantry, which illustrates the immense attrition caused by the war)*. In the entire campaign, the total forces committed by both sides exceeded 310,000 *(as the troop strength of the Xiongnu's Worthy Prince of the Left /* 左贤王 *is unrecorded)*.

This campaign, which primarily occurred at the Yuwu River (余吾水), became the largest main-force pitched battle in history to take place in the heart of the Mongolian Plateau. Even when Genghis Khan initially unified the various Mongol tribes, his total tribal followers numbered no more than 100,000.

Military operations in the Western Regions (西域) were even more extreme. Take Li Guangli's war to defeat Dayuan (大宛) as an example. The Han army that reached the capital of Dayuan numbered 30,000, while the army that set out from Dunhuang numbered 60,000. To support this distant expedition, an additional 200,000 people were conscripted for logistics. These figures are exceptionally high even among ***Central Plains dynasties*** (中原王朝 / Zhongyuan dynasties) undertaking military operations in the Western Regions. The Tang Dynasty's troops in the Western Regions were far short of 60,000, relying primarily on mobilizing forces from vassal states during combat. When the Tang army in the Western Regions fought the Arabs at the Battle of Talas (怛罗斯之战), the total allied forces on the Tang side did not exceed 30,000.

Further down the timeline, during the Qing Dynasty, when Emperor Qianlong pacified the Dzungars and the Hui (平准平回), and when Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠) recovered Xinjiang, the troop strengths deployed by the Qing army still did not surpass the Han Dynasty's war against Dayuan. The above only accounts for the Han side; judging from the fact that the Xiongnu could still

regroup and stage comebacks in multiple pitched battles, it is no exaggeration to say that the Xiongnu people were engaged in a "total war" (全民战争).

Seventh, the war between the Han and the Xiongnu was immensely protracted. During Emperor Wu's reign, starting from the Ambush at Mayi (马邑之谋), the two nations engaged in combat for over 40 years. If calculated up to 36 BCE when the Northern Xiongnu Chanyu Zhizhi (郅支单于) was killed, nearly a century had passed. From the late Western Han to the mid-Eastern Han, when the Northern Xiongnu finally fled far away, more than another century elapsed. If we trace it back to the early Han Dynasty when the Han army and the Xiongnu first engaged in combat, the war between the Han and Xiongnu regimes lasted for three centuries.

However, it must be pointed out that this prolonged conflict did not obstruct interactions between the two sides; the elongated line of confrontation was not an impenetrable wall of iron and brass. Emperor Wu's reign served as the turning point and peak of the Han-Xiongnu War. Although warfare was the overwhelmingly dominant form of interaction, it was precisely the war itself that brought about intense exchanges of personnel and materials.

Emperor Wu's reign was the period with the highest number of personnel crossing over to the opposing state, either through capture or voluntary surrender. From historical records, we can clearly note that both the Han Empire and the Xiongnu attached great importance to personnel from the enemy state who surrendered to them, invariably providing them with sincere and generous treatment. We can, of course, view this as a propaganda offensive, but in reality, these surrendered personnel indeed performed a great deal of work; some even directly led armies to fight against their former homelands, with Li Ling (李陵) being the most famous among them.

For the populace in the border regions of both nations, the situation was even more complex. For example, Zhao Ponu (赵破奴) was originally a native of Jiuyuan, but he fled to the Xiongnu in his youth, later returning to the Han to fight as a Han general. After being defeated and captured in one battle, he lived among the Xiongnu for another ten years before returning to the Han. Wei Lü (卫律) was originally a *Hu barbarian* (胡人) from Changshui who served the Han Dynasty. However, out of fear of being implicated in a political incident within the Han palace, he surrendered to the Xiongnu, became the chieftain of the Dingling (丁零) tribe, and, due to his identity as a Hu who understood the Han, became a crucial chief strategist (谋主) for the Xiongnu.

As for someone like Zhao Xin (赵信), he simply surrendered twice: first surrendering from the Xiongnu to the Han to fight for the Han, and then surrendering once again to the Xiongnu.

Upon surrendering, generals from both sides would bring crucial military intelligence. The Xiongnu could provide the Han with geographical information and knowledge of cavalry warfare (though, of course, direct participation in combat was the primary contribution). Conversely, the Han helped the Xiongnu train their troops—a fact that is invariably easy to overlook.

It should be pointed out that high-ranking Han defectors like Li Ling (李陵), who held immense power after surrendering to the Xiongnu, were highly effective in training the Xiongnu forces. For instance, in the final battle where the Xiongnu routed Li Guangli's (李广利) army, the Xiongnu actually approached the Han military camp at night by digging sapping trenches (挖壕沟), subsequently launching a surprise attack from the rear of the Han army to secure victory.

This method of approaching enemy defensive fortifications by excavating trenches was widely utilized in military operations right up to the last century. The fact that the Xiongnu won this battle —which ultimately forced Emperor Wu to issue the *Luntai Edict* (《轮台诏》 / *Edict of Repentance at Luntai*)—amply demonstrates the effectiveness of the training provided by surrendered Han generals and the extremely strong learning capacity of the Xiongnu. It was precisely this uninterrupted, mutual learning through warfare that allowed the disadvantaged party to always counterbalance the opponent's advantages to a certain extent, thereby prolonging the war even further.

Aside from battlefield captives and surrenders, the mutual dispatch of envoys by both sides also never experienced long-term interruption. Moreover, in the diplomatic processes between the two regimes, both sides regarded each other as peer competitors.

For example, during the period following the decisive Battle of Mobei, the Xiongnu were recovering, while the Han army was busy constructing an increasing number of fortresses further north, leading to a temporary halt in large-scale military operations. During this brief interwar period, envoys were frequently exchanged between the two nations. Even as the defeated party in the preceding phase of the war, the Xiongnu strenuously maintained their dignity and pursued parity in diplomacy. For instance, if a Han envoy refused to lay down his imperial credentials (符节) and paint his face with ink (墨涂面), he was denied entry into the Chanyu's great tent.

Simultaneously, when the two sides detained each other's envoys, they also pursued a tit-for-tat parity: if you detain one of my men, I will inevitably detain one of yours. After the concept of the Huaxia (华夏) ***community*** formed during the Zhou Dynasty, and before the prolonged war between the Han and the Xiongnu, the Huaxia people actually lacked an enemy possessing sufficient strength to demand parity. Consequently, the Huaxia could always contemptuously dismiss the surrounding foreign tribes as ***various barbarians*** (蛮夷戎狄 / Man, Yi, Rong, Di).

The Han-Xiongnu war forced this situation to undergo a transformation. Years of confrontation with the **"Other"** (他者) enhanced self-awareness on both sides. The war catalyzed cultural identification within both nations, especially for the Han people as the victors who turned the tide.

Today, when we examine the history of the Han-Xiongnu war, we must, on one hand, acknowledge that to win this war that determined the destiny of the state, the Han Empire drastically depleted ***Minli*** (***people's physical capacity and labor*** / 民力), to the extent that Emperor Wu had to conscript massive numbers of convicts in his later years.

But on the other hand, it is hard not to notice that at the time, an extraordinary patriotic enthusiasm indeed existed among Han intellectuals. The most quintessential evidence is that ever since conflicts with the Xiongnu became increasingly frequent, names brimming with patriotic sentiment like "Ponü" (破奴 - Smashing the Xiongnu) and "Anguo" (安国 - Securing the State) became symbols of an era.

Furthermore, every time the court launched a distant expedition against the Xiongnu or other enemies, no matter how treacherous the journey, it could not deter "those who followed with private provisions" (负私从者)—that is, private citizens bringing their own grain to follow the army and participate in the war. Whether one calls these people patriotic, or—as is certainly more likely—they were simply fighting for military merit (军功), considering that Emperor Wu's unsparing generosity in rewarding military merit was known to all under heaven.

Regardless, all of this illustrates that due to the specific social conditions of the mid-Western Han, the Han Empire's military expansion consistently possessed a certain foundation of public support. This is precisely why, despite undertaking military mobilizations of such colossal personnel scale across such vast distances, and despite there being generals who surrendered after defeat, there were exceedingly few mutinying soldiers (哗变的士卒).

Eighth, the war between the Han and the Xiongnu was reflected not only in its scale, scope, and duration, but it also brought about a thorough revolution in the military affairs of all of ***East Asia*** (东亚).

This permeated almost every aspect of the military, including weapons, military technology, troop types, tactics, military systems, and strategy. This transformation aligns with general military logic: the more intense the military conflict, the larger its scale, and the longer its duration, the more profound the resulting military innovations will inevitably be.

During this war, certain weapons and equipment that had occupied prominent positions in Chinese cultural imagery were rendered obsolete, represented by the dagger-axe (*Ge* / 戈) and the war chariot (战车). Meanwhile, new iconic weapons entered the historical stage, represented by the ring-pommel sword (*Huanshou Dao* / 环首刀) and the Han crossbow (*Han Nu* / 汉弩).

To adapt to different enemies in diverse regions, the Han army had to employ new technologies to improve its armaments. For example, during the conquest of the South, facing the Yue (越) people's proficiency in diving, the warships of the Han inland river navy had to be equipped with devices to prevent underwater sabotage. Conversely, to combat the Xiongnu army, which excelled at horseback archery on the northern steppes, the Han's own cavalry had to be equipped with more practical riding gear. Based on the historical fact that the Han Dynasty employed large-scale cavalry shock charges, there is ample reason to believe that stirrups (马镫) and high saddles (高马鞍) had already seen a certain degree of use.

The most crucial military technological innovation, however, was the popularization of iron. During Emperor Wu's reign, the Chinese Empire's iron smelting technology (especially blast furnace iron smelting / 高炉炼铁), alongside the quality and output of iron, experienced a massive elevation. Iron weapons became fundamentally ubiquitous, and the defensive and lethal capabilities of the army visibly ascended to a new level. As the representative of Han iron weapons, the Han sword (*Han Jian* / 汉剑) not only became an essential weapon for troops in combat but also began to play an increasingly significant role in Chinese culture. Male aristocrats wearing swords became a fashion, and even a symbol of status and rank.

Fighting a cavalry-dominated Xiongnu army on Xiongnu territory required the Han army to possess commensurate mobility. Thus, through the military practice of two outstanding commanders, Wei Qing (卫青) and Huo Qubing (霍去病), the tactics of large-scale cavalry corps operations (骑兵大兵团作战) matured. Now, the Chinese army could deploy cavalry to win a decisive pitched battle, rather than relegating cavalry to a mere supporting role in warfare.

Furthermore, the victorious counterattacks against the Xiongnu also altered the Han Dynasty's long-standing shortage of horses. At the foot of today's Qilian Mountains (祁连山), the Han Empire acquired the highest quality and largest-scale military horse breeding ground in Chinese history, known today as the Shandan Horse Farm (山丹军马场). Ever since Emperor Wu conquered this region up to the present day, it has remained one of the largest sources of premium warhorses in the entire world. The increase in animal power brought immense improvements to Han military logistics. Later, when Li Guangli (李广利) campaigned against Dayuan (大宛), Emperor Wu

equipped him with a logistical transport fleet composed of over a hundred thousand cattle, horses, donkeys, and camels.

In addition to cavalry entering the historical stage as a primary troop type, the navy played a role in the military conquest of the South during Emperor Wu's reign equivalent to that of the cavalry in the North. Even more remarkably, the Han Empire was not satisfied with merely using a navy to control inland river navigation; instead, it boldly commanded it to venture into the ocean, achieving military glory in the war to conquer Joseon (朝鲜). Benefiting from the development of shipbuilding technology, the Chinese Empire, for the first time in its history, (partially) controlled a large island beyond the mainland: Hainan Island (海南岛).

In order to still command a powerful military force directly subordinate to the emperor amidst frequent military deployments, Emperor Wu established the Eight Colonels (*Ba Xiaowei* / 八校尉). This marked the beginning of the *mercenary/recruitment system* (募兵制) in the Han Dynasty, signifying a further elevation in the professionalization of the Chinese military.

Finally, a crucial outcome of the Han Empire's military expansion was that, for the first time, the Chinese people grasped the topographical formations and political regime distributions within a radius of several thousand kilometers surrounding their inhabited lands. This enabled China, for the first time since its unification, to formulate a **grand national strategy** (国家战略).

Even today, people can still discern Emperor Wu's extraordinary strategic vision from China's current administrative divisions and historical events subsequent to the Han Dynasty.

During Emperor Wu's reign, the most vital strategic doctrine and legacy were directed against the formidable northern enemy, the Xiongnu—a strategy that held profound historical significance throughout the entire ancient period. Targeting the natural conditions of the Mongolian Plateau—which is higher in the west and lower in the east, colder in the west and warmer in the east, and drier in the west while wetter in the east—the Han army focused the brunt of its counteroffensive on the east. They dealt a devastating blow to the Xiongnu's heartland and constructed military defensive fortresses in the upper reaches of the Kherlen River.

In executing this, Emperor Wu paid immense attention to dividing the northern *Hu barbarians*, particularly separating the nomadic tribes in the heart of the Mongolian Plateau from those on its eastern fringes, namely the Eastern Hu (*Donghu* / 东胡). While ordering Huo Qubing to smash the Xiongnu's Left Territory, he simultaneously applied a policy of conciliation and appeasement (怀柔政策) toward the Eastern Hu ethnic groups headed by the Wuhuan (乌桓). He established the Colonel Protector of the Wuhuan (*Hu Wuhuan Xiaowei* / 护乌桓校尉) to govern the Wuhuan who

had submitted internally (内附), and specifically demanded *"that they must not be allowed to communicate or interact with the Xiongnu"* (使其不得与匈奴交通).

Emperor Wu's policy of drawing close to the Eastern Hu exerted a profound impact on the history of the Chinese Empire. Over the next four centuries or so, the nomadic tribes on the eastern edge of Mongolia—the Wuhuan and Xianbei (鲜卑)—maintained an intimate relationship with the Han-ethnicity court. Although wars were not entirely absent, they appeared as allies the vast majority of the time. Even at the onset of the massive northern chaos at the end of the Western Jin Dynasty, the Wuhuan and Xianbei in the northeast still regarded the Eastern Jin regime (which had just retreated to Jiangzuo) as an ally, and proceeded to attack the Xiongnu led by Liu Yuan (刘渊) and the Jie (羯) *barbarians* subordinated to Shi Le (石勒). Once the ethnic minorities of Mongolia and the Northeast united, or a single ethnicity occupied both regions, their threat would multiply exponentially. The histories of the Xianbei and the Manchus (满洲人) fully prove this point.

Meanwhile, to the west of Mongolia, Emperor Wu also realized the colossal danger posed by a union between the ethnic minorities of the Mongolian Plateau and the Tibetan Plateau (青藏高原). He resolutely executed the strategic policy of **"isolating the Qiang from the Hu"** (隔绝羌胡). He conquered the Hexi Corridor (河西走廊) and the Hehuang region, subsequently marching massive armies into Xinjiang, thereby forming an encircling posture against the Xiongnu in reverse.

Throughout all historical periods, this strategy held monumental significance for stabilizing the western frontiers of the Chinese Empire. During Emperor Wu's time, there was no powerful regime in the heart of the Tibetan Plateau, and the Qiang people primarily operated on the plateau's eastern fringes. It was not until seven centuries later, with the rapid rise of the Tibetan Empire (吐蕃帝国), that Emperor Wu's strategic vision spanned the long years to reveal its extraordinary value.

At the absolute zenith of Tibetan power, Li Bi (李泌), a renowned minister of the mid-Tang Dynasty, proposed a strategy of diplomatic liaison with the nations surrounding Tibet, particularly advocating an alliance with the Uyghurs (回纥) who had already occupied the northern steppes, to jointly counter Tibet. This strategy achieved monumental success. It fostered mutual hostility between the regimes of the Mongolian Plateau and the Tibetan Plateau, ensured the relative stability of the Tang Dynasty's frontiers, curbed Tibetan expansion, and ultimately dragged down this massive plateau empire.

In contrast, Mongolia during the Ming and Qing dynasties became a counter-example of what happens when this strategy is not well executed. In the 17th century, using Tibetan Buddhism (藏传

佛教) as a nexus, the connections between various Mongol tribes and Tibet grew increasingly intimate. Ultimately, a powerful Tibetan Buddhist Khanate (i.e., the Dzungar Khanate) formed in western China, posing a severe threat to the Qing Dynasty. When the Qing Empire finally pacified its western frontiers after decades of effort spanning three emperors, it had no choice but to re-examine the wisdom of the Han Empire from two millennia prior.

Even today, the long and narrow province of Gansu (甘肃)—primarily populated by Han Chinese—stretches across and physically separates the four autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia, completely isolating the former two from the latter two geographically. Its political significance is entirely self-evident.

Ninth, the Han Dynasty's foreign wars brought about more than just military victories. Aside from annexing enemies and expanding territory, the most crucial benefit of Han military expansion lay in the Han people discovering and opening up routes of interaction with the outside world.

Ancient ***East Asia*** possessed a total of four major trade routes connecting to the outside world. The northernmost route traversed the ***Eurasian Steppe*** (欧亚大草原) westward from the Mongolian Plateau, stringing together this massive nomadic region. Its zenith was naturally the era of the Mongol conquests—the most glorious years of the Mongol Empire's capital, Karakorum (哈拉和林). This is known as the Steppe Silk Road (草原丝绸之路).

The second route exited modern China's borders via the Hexi Corridor in Gansu and along the foothills of the east-west mountain ranges in Xinjiang, reaching ***Central Asia*** (中亚), and then connecting to the further West via Iran. This is what is now commonly called the Silk Road (丝绸之路).

The third route set sail from China's southeastern coast southward into the sea. Initially, it turned into the Gulf of Siam (暹罗湾) and crossed the Isthmus of Kra (克拉地峡). With advancements in navigation and shipbuilding technology, by the Tang Dynasty, it had evolved to pass through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean, reaching India, and even further to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the coast of East Africa. This is what is now commonly called the Maritime Silk Road (海上丝绸之路).

The fourth route consists of the corridors connecting southern Chinese regions like Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet to the outside world at various historical periods, represented by the Shu-Shendu

Road (蜀身毒道 / Sichuan-India Road) and the Tea Horse Road (茶马古道). Today, this is referred to as the Southwestern Silk Road (西南丝绸之路).

Because China could not establish stable rule over the Mobei plateau prior to the Qing Dynasty, and by the time of the Qing, the ***Eurasian Steppe*** had declined and the Steppe Silk Road had ceased to exist, its significance to the Chinese Empire was extremely limited.

Of the remaining three external corridors that the Chinese Empire could control, both the overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road were opened up during Emperor Wu's reign through foreign wars and diplomatic activities. The starting point of the latter back then was located in modern-day Xuwen (徐闻), Guangdong Province—known in the Han Dynasty as Hepu Commandery (合浦郡), which was territory of the Nanyue Kingdom (南越国) before being conquered by the Han Empire.

As for the third, relatively less important Southwestern Silk Road, although it was not considered fully connected until the Ailao (哀牢) people *submitted internally* (内附) during the Eastern Han Dynasty, through Emperor Wu's subjugation of the **Southwestern Barbarians** (西南夷) and the Han Empire's road construction in the southwest region (represented by the Bonan Trail / 博南道), its ultimate incorporation into the Chinese Empire's control was merely a matter of time.

Therefore, we can say that out of the three external trade corridors meaningful to ***Central Plains dynasties***, Emperor Wu's military conquests transformed the two most important ones into reality and laid the foundation for the opening of the relatively secondary third one.

Beyond the main routes leading to the major parts of the western Eurasian continent, the Han Empire's conquest of Joseon in the northeast and its frequent naval patrols promoted communication and development in the Northeast Asian region. The *Treatise on Geography in the Book of Han* (《汉书地理志》) mentions that beyond the seas of Lelang Commandery (乐浪郡), there were the Wa people (倭人) who frequently came to pay tribute (朝贡). This is the first recorded interaction between China and Japan, which subsequently became increasingly common. In fact, archaeology also indicates that the Qin and Han periods were the critical era when wet-rice cultivation technology was rapidly disseminated across the Japanese archipelago, leading to swift progress in Japanese society.

The establishment of connections with the outside world not only more than doubled the known world of the Chinese people but also brought tremendous progress to China. Taking the Maritime Silk Road alone as an example, in order to conquer the turbulent South China Sea, a series of great

maritime inventions were born during the Han Dynasty, including the balanced lugsail (平衡式梯形斜帆), the yuloh (船橹 / scull or sweep), and the sternpost rudder (船舵).

Simultaneously, driven by the needs of positioning and maritime observation, related mathematical methods also emerged during the Han Dynasty. In the *Haidao Suanjing* (《海岛算经》 / *The Sea Island Mathematical Manual*) written by the Chinese mathematician Liu Hui (刘徽) during the Wei-Jin period, many mathematical problems originated from maritime navigation.

In reality, although ***East Asia***—blocked by plateaus and mountain ranges—was only a relatively secondary part of the Eurasian continent, the scientific (including mathematical) creations born in China indeed reached their zeniths, both in quality and quantity, during two specific periods. The first was the roughly 200 years of the two Han dynasties; the second was the period of the Song, Jin, and Yuan empires. The common characteristic of these two periods was highly frequent foreign exchange, especially compared to preceding eras.

Undoubtedly, China's military conquests during Emperor Wu's reign were not merely about expanding territory; they were equally a process of China discovering, experiencing, and embracing the world.

Tenth, although the distinction between civil and military officials was not yet pronounced throughout the Han Dynasty, we can still note that despite undertaking foreign wars of such magnitude during the mid-Western Han, the central government consistently maintained firm control over the military.

Unlike many conquering empires, Emperor Wu did not take the field to personally lead campaigns (御驾亲征) while undertaking the enterprise of *expanding territory and repelling barbarians* (拓土攘夷). The only time he arrayed an army of 180,000 to march north and invite the Chanyu to a decisive battle was more of a demonstration of power; in reality, it was impossible for the Chanyu to actually show up and ask for such a humiliation.

Although Emperor Wu conducted numerous imperial inspection tours, his primary destinations were not the frontier territories he had newly conquered. In his youth, the emperor frequently led his retinue to hunt and engage in hand-to-hand combat. This hobby accompanied him throughout his life; in his later reign, he even watched *Juedi* (角抵 / ancient Chinese wrestling) alongside commoners. Living to the age of 70 under such high-intensity internal and external pressures is sufficient to prove that Emperor Wu was personally in excellent health.

Yet, the monarch of the Han Empire no longer needed to consolidate his rule by commanding in person on the battlefield or achieving military victories through the flaunting of martial valor. Therefore, we can say that the highest decision-makers of the empire directed this epoch-making war through the empire's *bureaucratic system* (官僚制度) from a court that was increasingly distant from the front lines (because the front lines were constantly pushing outward).

Simultaneously, although the war against the Xiongnu allowed many to reap military merit and subsequently obtain noble ranks, even a war of such duration and scale failed to produce a *military aristocracy* (军事贵族) group capable of exerting a decisive role in politics. The Han army remained consistently under the control of the central government, let alone being able to dictate the succession of the imperial throne like the Roman legions.

And the man who ultimately brought about the end of the Western Han, Wang Mang (王莽), did not rise from the military ranks. On the contrary, he was a great Confucian scholar with the status of an imperial relative by marriage (外戚 / consort kin). Supported by the bureaucrats, he ultimately usurped the emperor's throne through relatively peaceful means.

3, The Xiongnu Were Inherently Powerful, and Their Threat Was Psychologically Amplified

When we finish analyzing and systematizing the characteristics of the foreign wars during Emperor Wu's reign from historical texts, it is no longer difficult to see why warfare occupied such a central position in the political life of the mid-Han empire, to the extent that numerous other state enterprises were subordinated to serve the war effort. *(Issues concerning the Xiongnu are explained in greater detail in Chapter 7, Section 1, and Chapter 12, Section 25).*

First, the Xiongnu constituted a far more powerful nomadic empire than what ordinary people imagine today.

Archaeological excavations within the borders of China, Mongolia, and Russia have already demonstrated that the Xiongnu possessed iron-smelting capabilities and extensively utilized iron weapons. This point is also acknowledged by Chinese historical records; the *"Mingdi"* (鸣镝 / whistling arrows) has become a prominent motif in Chinese literature used to symbolize the enemy's military operations.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Xiongnu army consisted mostly of cavalry not merely due to environmental reasons; their military technology was absolutely not backward. At the very least, there was no generational gap between them and the Han Empire (at the onset of the war).

Iron stirrups (马镫) dating no later than the 2nd century BCE have been excavated in the Mongolian region, which astonishingly predates the earliest physical stirrups excavated in ***the Central Plains*** by over 400 years *(though this remains disputed)*.

Although the Xiongnu's mode of production was primarily nomadic, agriculture, fishing, and hunting also held considerable proportions. Chinese historical texts even contain records regarding Xiongnu agricultural crop failures. Following the rapid expansion of the Xiongnu and the early Han Dynasty, the oasis agricultural zones in modern-day Gansu and Xinjiang were directly or indirectly placed under Xiongnu control. Under such circumstances, it is highly probable that the ***productive forces*** (生产力) of the Xiongnu underwent further elevation, and their political system continued to evolve.

Judging from the Xiongnu troop strengths recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the *Book of Han*, their military scale was exceedingly massive *(which implies that the Xiongnu population could not have been small; at its zenith, it may have exceeded 2 million)*. Leaving aside the exaggerated accounts of Emperor Gaozu (Liu Bang) being encircled at Mount Baideng (白登山) during the early Han, even after their power drastically declined following their defeat in the decisive Battle of Mobei, the Xiongnu during Emperor Wu's reign could still mobilize over 100,000 cavalry to engage the Han army in pitched battles, often deploying a force ranging from half to equal the size of a single Han military column.

In reality, the deployable troop strength of the Xiongnu only massively deteriorated during the reigns of Emperor Zhao and Emperor Xuan (昭宣时期) following Emperor Wu's death *(at which point they could barely deploy 20,000 troops in a single battle)*. The *Book of Han* explicitly records that although the Han army invariably struggled to secure tactical victories in the later stages of the war, they indeed succeeded strategically in compressing the Xiongnu's survival space and dragging them down:

"Prior to this, Han troops had penetrated deep and pursued them relentlessly for over twenty years; the Xiongnu's pregnant women and animals suffered miscarriages and stillbirths, and the people were utterly exhausted and suffered bitterly from it. From the Chanyu downwards, they constantly harbored plans for Heqin (peace through marriage)" (前此者，汉兵深入穷追二十余年，匈奴孕重惰殰，罢极苦之。自单于以下常有欲和亲计).

However, by the 2nd year of the Shenjue era under Emperor Xuan, records of troop strengths exceeding 100,000 reappeared *(at this time, the Han Dynasty had abandoned its network of fortresses beyond the frontiers, allowing the Xiongnu's survival space to recover somewhat)*. It was just that by then, their disadvantage relative to the Han Empire had become irreversible, thus leading them toward fragmentation amidst internal strife.

Later, although the Southern Xiongnu surrendered to the Han Dynasty, the Xiongnu people consistently maintained a strong sense of self-identity. Therefore, even after being defeated, the Xiongnu as an ethno-cultural ***community*** persisted for over five centuries. As late as the early 5th

century CE, the Xiongnu leader Helian Bobo (赫连勃勃) established the Hu Xia (胡夏) regime in today's Shaanxi region. It was not until the Northern Dynasties period that the concept of "Xiongnu" gradually vanished from reality. Their resilience is fully evident.

It is also worth noting that although today we have no way of knowing exactly how the Xiongnu's political system operated, we can still discern its astonishing stability from historical records.

During the 80 years after Modu Chanyu (冒顿单于) decisively eliminated his father Touman Chanyu (头曼单于), the rule of three successive Chanyus was phenomenally stable *(far surpassing that of the contemporaneous Han Dynasty)*, and they continued to expand right up until Emperor Wu initiated his counterattacks. Perhaps it was the Han Empire's counteroffensive that triggered the Xiongnu Empire's first civil war, but Yizhixie (伊稚斜) easily secured victory.

The subsequent half-century was extremely excruciating for the Xiongnu, yet it was precisely this adversity that revealed the extraordinary stability of Xiongnu politics.

When Wei Qing (卫青) routed Yizhixie's forces in the decisive Battle of Mobei, the Chanyu had to find a way to escape the Han army's pursuit, thereby becoming separated from his main forces. Believing the Chanyu had died in battle, the Worthy Prince of the Right (右贤王) established himself as Chanyu. However, upon Yizhixie's return, the Worthy Prince of the Right immediately discarded the Chanyu title and yielded it back to Yizhixie. The fact that the Xiongnu's political power could still operate so smoothly after suffering such a devastating defeat is virtually unimaginable even today.

Under the relentless, step-by-step advance of the Han army, and despite frequent turnover at the highest echelons of leadership, the Xiongnu continued to fight tenaciously against the Han forces. After Yizhixie died, he passed the throne to his son Wuwei (乌维); after Wuwei died, it passed to his son Zhanshilu (詹师庐). Because Zhanshilu was young, he was known as the Child Chanyu (儿单于).

The Han court believed this was a prime opportunity to divide the Xiongnu, so they dispatched envoys to visit both the Chanyu and the Worthy Prince of the Right separately. The Xiongnu people handed all of them over to the Child Chanyu, who promptly detained the Han envoys. The Xiongnu's Chief Commandant of the Left (左大都尉) attempted to assassinate the Chanyu and surrender to the Han, but his plot failed and he was executed. The Child Chanyu then led 80,000 cavalry to attack the Han general Zhao Ponu (赵破奴), who was originally preparing to rendezvous with the Chief Commandant, capturing him and completely annihilating his army.

The Child Chanyu died after only three years on the throne. The Worthy Prince of the Right, Julihu (句黎湖), served as Chanyu for one year before also dying. His younger brother Qiedihou (且鞮侯) became Chanyu, reigning for five years before his death. His eldest son Hulugu Chanyu (狐鹿姑单于) succeeded him, becoming the final Xiongnu Chanyu to cross swords with Emperor Wu.

During these 30 years, although the Han army suffered frequent defeats, the front line was continuously pushed forward *(of course, this advance was primarily occurring in the Xinjiang region; the Han Dynasty had clearly reached its culminating point of attack on the Mongolian Plateau)*, and the pressure on the Xiongnu tightened increasingly.

We can vividly sense the desperation of the Xiongnu's situation back then simply from the fact that these Chanyus averaged a mere few years on the throne. *(The late reign of Emperor Wu saw the shortest average reigns for Xiongnu rulers, with five Chanyus replaced within 30 years. In comparison, even during chaotic eras (乱世), the Han Zhao [汉赵] regime had four emperors in 25 years, the Hu Xia [胡夏] regime had three emperors in 24 years, and the Northern Liang [北凉] regime had only four monarchs in 60 years).*

Yet, even in such circumstances where they had retreated into their nation's heartland with their backs to the wall, the Xiongnu still managed to maintain considerable political solidarity and secured tactical victories in the vast majority of engagements. It was not until the reign of Emperor Zhao of Han (汉昭帝) that the political solidarity of the Xiongnu finally disintegrated, leading to their ultimate fragmentation during Emperor Xuan's reign.

The tenacity of the Xiongnu is phenomenally extraordinary among all nomadic ethnicities born on the Mongolian Plateau throughout the ages. Later in history, only the Mongol nation established by Genghis Khan could compare with them, but the Xiongnu achieved this over 13 centuries before Genghis Khan.

In addition to this, ever since the late Warring States period, personnel exchanges across the boundary line between the agrarian regions of northern China and the nomadic regions had been highly frequent. The Xiongnu had become accustomed to, and were exceedingly adept at, learning from their southern neighbors. The battle in which they defeated Li Guangli is an excellent example of this, making the Xiongnu an even more formidable adversary to deal with.

Secondly, a particularly overlooked point is that what caused the Han court immense anxiety regarding the Xiongnu was not solely the inherent strength of the Xiongnu themselves, but the trending trajectory of the power dynamic between the Han and the Xiongnu.

When people today open a historical atlas, they must realize that the ancient people's understanding of the world at that time was by no means what historical maps reflect. This was especially apparent during the early years of the Han Dynasty. In that era, the Han people knew exceedingly little about the surrounding world; they were utterly incapable of clearly articulating the geography or the distribution of political regimes beyond ***Handi***.

From the perspective of the political landscape, the critical reason was that during the transition between the Qin and Han dynasties, a series of regimes were established around the periphery of the Han ethnicity. These regimes suppressed the Han Empire along the **interior lines** (内线), making it difficult for the empire to comprehend the world beyond these immediate neighbors.

In stark contrast, the Han Empire's most formidable enemy, the Xiongnu, occupied an open geostrategic position on the **exterior lines**. This resulted in the Xiongnu not only being already immensely powerful but also capable of continuous expansion for over 70 years during the early Han.

We must point out that the Han rulers could distinctly sense the Xiongnu growing increasingly powerful through expansion. A classic example is Zhang Qian's (张骞) mission to the Western Regions. The initial diplomatic objective of this famous envoy and explorer was to contact the Greater Yuezhi (大月氏)—who had been continuously routed by Modu and Laoshang Chanyus and forced to migrate westward—to jointly attack the Xiongnu. This clearly indicates that the Han court knew the Xiongnu had undertaken forceful expansion in the West, yet remained highly ignorant of the actual situation on the ground.

In reality, the Han people did not need to rely on occasional foreign visitors or diplomatic missions traveling between the Han and Xiongnu to sense this expansion; the Xiongnu's attacks on the Han Dynasty themselves proved the point. Prior to the mid-reign of Emperor Wen, Xiongnu attacks on the Han primarily occurred in northern Shanxi and the adjacent Inner Mongolian regions, with Yunzhong (云中) and Yanmen (雁门) being the hardest-hit disaster zones.

By the time the Xiongnu conquered the Hexi Corridor, the military pressure facing the Han Empire in the northwest escalated continuously. The furthest the Xiongnu advanced reached Didao (狄道), which was already south of the Yellow River on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. In the 14th year of Emperor Wen's reign, Laoshang Chanyu led 140,000 cavalry through Xiaoguan (萧关) into the pass, shaking the entire Guanzhong region, yet the Han army failed to inflict any casualties on the Xiongnu forces. From then on, border alarms flared frequently in Longxi and Beidi.

After expelling the original ethnicities in the west, the Xiongnu migrated in en masse. Within a mere half-century, the Hexi Corridor became indistinguishable from the Xiongnu's original

homeland, so much so that when Huo Qubing captured this region, the Xiongnu composed a song mourning its loss.

The situation on the eastern border was the same. During the first 50 years of the Han Dynasty, the Yan (燕) region generally suffered no Xiongnu incursions. *(The Biographies of the Xiongnu records a Xiongnu attack on Liaodong Commandery, but this is absent from the Basic Annals. Furthermore, considering geographical factors, this is illogical and seems more likely to be the doing of the Eastern Hu / 东胡).*

However, starting from the Zhongyuan era (中元年间) of Emperor Jing, the Xiongnu began to invade. Yuyang (渔阳) and Youbeiping (右北平) became new battlegrounds, to the point that veteran generals with rich border defense experience like Li Guang (李广) had to be dispatched there—which is precisely where he earned the legendary moniker of the "Flying General" (飞将军).

It must be pointed out that although both the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the *Book of Han* state that Modu Chanyu conquered the Eastern Hu during his reign, bringing *"all those who draw the bow under a single rule"* (控弦之民皆为一统), the influence the Xiongnu could exert over the Eastern Hu at that time was still limited. Perhaps they were merely satisfied with formal suzerainty and the collection of tribute taxes, which is why the Beijing area was rarely attacked in the early Han years.

As the Xiongnu Empire grew increasingly powerful, the Eastern Hu, as tribes subjugated to the Xiongnu, inevitably lost their autonomy. The Xiongnu were then able to launch increasingly forceful offensives against the Yan region from the "Xiongnu's Left Territory" (from a north-facing-south perspective).

We can easily find evidence in historical texts of the Eastern Hu being oppressed. For instance, in the 6th year of the Zhongyuan era under Emperor Jing, Lu Tazi (卢他之)—the grandson of Lu Wan (卢绾), who had fled beyond the Great Wall in the early Han and become the King of Lu of the Eastern Hu—submitted to the Han Dynasty once again. In the 1st year of the Yuanshuo era, a chieftain of the Eastern Yi (东夷) led 280,000 of his people to submit internally (内附). When Emperor Wu decided to launch his counteroffensive against the Xiongnu, he likely took note of the recent tense relations between the Eastern Hu and the Xiongnu. The Eastern Hu were clearly targets worthy of division and ***co-optation***, and this policy achieved success.

The aforementioned historical facts demonstrate that by the time Emperor Wu ascended the throne, the pattern of conflict between the Han and the Xiongnu was by no means fixed or unchanging;

rather, it grew increasingly widespread day by day in tandem with Xiongnu expansion. By the time Emperor Wu governed, there was not a single northern frontier commandery that did not have to guard against the possibility of a Xiongnu invasion at any moment.

Facing this situation of "guarding against thieves for a thousand days" (千日防贼), the Han Empire was inevitably stretched thin. The fact that a veteran border general with rich defensive experience like Li Guang served successively as the Grand Administrator (太守) of Longxi, Beidi, Shangjun, Yunzhong, Yanmen, and Youbeiping within a mere decade or so—and even commanded court armies in battle as the Commandant of Guards (卫尉)—amply illustrates the urgency of the enemy situation on the borders.

Once this was coupled with the Han Empire's ignorance of its surrounding environment, it exerted colossal psychological pressure on the Han ruling elites.

Although official historiography has consistently extolled the achievements of "resting with the people" (休养生息) during the reigns of Wen and Jing, fundamental common sense indicates that the purpose of such a policy is to ensure that the balance of power shifts in one's own favor over time, not against it. Suppose peace allows our country's strength to grow by 100%, but our archenemy's strength grows by 200%. Given that confrontation between the two nations is inevitable, such peace is therefore harmful rather than beneficial.

Indeed, during the decades prior to Emperor Wu, the Han Empire achieved natural agricultural economic recovery through a policy of quietism and non-interference (清静无为). However, the Xiongnu's effectively controlled territory also more than doubled. More fatally, an agricultural economy invariably possesses a hard ceiling. The emergence of the phenomenon where *"the rich own fields stretching from path to path, while the poor have not even enough land to stand an awl upon"* (富者田连阡陌，贫者无立锥之地), combined with the increasingly frequent natural disasters, foreshadowed that this ceiling was about to be hit.

Another method for the Han Empire to increase its strength was by reducing the autonomy of the vassal kingdoms (诸侯王国) to centralize power. But this too came to a temporary halt following the weakening of the vassal kingdoms after the suppression of the Rebellion of the Seven States (七国之乱).

Let us place ourselves in the shoes of the young Emperor Wu and consider what he saw: Regardless of whether the 70 years of peace in the early Han were genuinely beneficial to the Han Dynasty (which could not be precisely calculated then, nor can it be now), it was now absolutely certain that the two factors previously supporting the growth of the Han Empire's national strength—namely,

the natural growth of the economy and the intensified extraction from the eastern vassal kingdoms —had either already vanished or were about to disappear. In fact, due to the tyrannical and merciless natural disasters of floods, droughts, locusts, and freezes, the Han Empire's national strength might even be weakened.

Conversely, the Xiongnu had been expanding their scope of control and power for the past 70 years. The Chanyu already governed a vast expanse of ten thousand *li* encompassing numerous different ethnicities and a multitude of *production modes* (生产方式). Given time, it was impossible for the Xiongnu to permanently remain in the state of a tribal empire; political advancements would inevitably strengthen the Xiongnu once again.

What was even more fatal was that the Han people lacked knowledge of exactly where the Xiongnu had expanded to and what lay beyond the Xiongnu. They had absolutely no way of judging where the limits of Xiongnu expansion lay. In fact, we know today that this anxiety was entirely justified. When the Xiongnu rose as the first nomadic empire in human history, the northern part of the entire Eurasian continent was so starkly empty that no rival capable of matching them existed. Consequently, when the portion of the Xiongnu forced to migrate westward after long and brutal wars with the Han finally left ***East Asia***, they encountered scarcely any rivals, driving and oppressing the ethnicities along their path to move further toward Europe and ***South Asia*** (南亚).

And all of the above considerations pertained solely to a single enemy, the Xiongnu. It did not mean that Joseon (朝鲜), Nanyue (南越), the Western Qiang (西羌), and the various southwestern nations would merely sit idle and wait without developing. Today, the Museum of the Mausoleum of the Nanyue King in Guangzhou exhibits a Persian-style silver box from the Nanyue period. How could one guarantee that if Nanyue maintained its independence, it would not eventually develop into a powerful maritime trade-based state?

Based on such information, the decision-makers of the Han Empire in the early years of Emperor Wu could easily arrive at this judgment: from this moment on, the earlier the war is initiated, the better; the faster the war preparations are completed, the better. Allowing peace to persist would inevitably weaken the Han Dynasty's relative strength and cause the surrounding nations' encirclement of the Han to solidify day by day, thereby placing the altars of earth and grain (社稷 / the state) in danger of being overturned.

Synthesizing the above considerations, the primary tasks of the empire consisted of the following four points:

First, launch a comprehensive strategic counteroffensive, seize the initiative, repel or even annihilate the enemies, and shatter the disadvantageous situation where surrounding nations suppressed the Han Empire along the interior lines. By establishing contact with the outside world, the Han Empire could thus successfully break through the encirclement.

Second, improve production tools and agricultural techniques, popularize new crops, and construct water conservancy projects to enhance the overall ***productive forces*** (生产力) of the empire. This would allow the empire to break through the economic ceiling reached under the policies of the Wen and Jing periods.

Third, further strengthen the empire's capacity to extract and distribute social wealth. This included reclaiming the right to mint coinage, enacting state monopolies (官营) over vital resources, implementing the Equitable Delivery and Balanced Standard system (平准均输), and even plundering affluent groups within the empire, including the vassal kings. By doing so, revenue could be vastly expanded upon the foundation of the second point, to be utilized for war and to hedge against losses caused by natural disasters.

Fourth, in order to accomplish the above three tasks, the empire required an incredibly powerful *bureaucratic system*—surpassing anything in previous human history—to execute them. Simultaneously, it necessitated a widely recognized official ideology to unify the hearts of the people to the greatest possible extent.

At this point, if we look back at the multitude of policies implemented during Emperor Wu's reign, it is not difficult to discover that they were formulated precisely around these four objectives.

When we review the well-known historical realities, we find that although Emperor Wu in his later years was frequently so radical as to launch wars recklessly, he was by no means an innate warmonger. On the contrary, when the young emperor initially decided to counterattack, he was as careful and cautious as one could possibly be; he was entirely devoid of brimming confidence.

Not only did he dispatch envoys to the Greater Yuezhi (大月氏)—a nation whose attitude and even exact location were utterly unknown—naively hoping to borrow the strength of this phantom ally. Even his very first war against the Xiongnu after taking the throne was not an active offensive. Instead, he retreated from the border, attempting to lure the main force of the Xiongnu Chanyu into an encirclement for an ambush (i.e., the Ambush at Mayi), completely disregarding how incredibly difficult it would be to maintain intelligence secrecy while laying an ambush with 300,000 troops. What a deeply conservative military strategy this was!

However, once we comprehend, through deduction, the colossal pressure the young emperor felt back then, we can understand his restless and anxious psychology.

Simultaneously, one cannot regard Emperor Wu merely as a fanatical expansionist. Although his actions were sometimes rash due to the environment he was in, looking at his entire political career, the utilitarianism displayed by this out-and-out pragmatist (实用主义者) is exceedingly rare in world history.

Liu Che was far from being a *Pixiu* (貔貅 / a mythical beast that only consumes and never excretes). This very monarch—renowned for conquering astonishing expanses of territory—actually relinquished easily obtainable lands three times during his life. The first was abandoning Canghai Commandery (沧海郡); the second was abandoning Doupi County in Shanggu Commandery (上谷郡斗辟县); the third was suspending the pioneering of the Southwest.

This seemingly stark contrast actually reflects the very consistency of the emperor's political objectives: to pour every ounce of usable power entirely into the war against the Xiongnu. The three aforementioned instances of territorial abandonment were all designed to serve the exclusive management and fortification of Shuofang (朔方), thereby utilizing it to continue the grand decisive war against the Xiongnu.

In fact, since the 19th century, many scholars have linked China's powerful centralized system to the necessities of water conservancy projects and the border threats in the North. However, their discussions have been far too generalized, failing to articulate exactly when and how this influence occurred.

It must be pointed out that although the *bureaucratic system* (官僚体制) of the Chinese Empire generally strengthened over a protracted historical period, its foundation was laid rapidly within the very short timeframe (relative to two millennia, of course) of Emperor Wu's reign. The selection of officials, the censorship system, state-monopolized commerce, state coinage, orthodox ideology, state schools, and the calendar were all formed or matured in less than half a century, with countless institutions and precedents being established.

The reason I believe this series of downright revolutionary reforms had to be executed immediately within a short period to cope with deteriorating internal and external situations is that, judging from historical records, Emperor Wu exhibited a distinct prudence regarding the expansion of state power. He did not believe that the systems he had pioneered should continue to be executed unconditionally forever.

The most crucial example is the divergence between Emperor Wu and Crown Prince Liu Ju (太子刘据). Crown Prince Liu Ju himself harbored no fondness for "revenue-generating officials" (兴利之臣 / officials who promoted state monopolies and taxation). He possessed a benevolent and lenient personality, and instead of aligning with the *Gongyang* (公羊) school heavily favored during Emperor Wu's reign, he studied the *Guliang Commentary* (《谷梁传》).

Today, people invariably focus on the tragic Disaster of Witchcraft (*Wugu zhi huo* / 巫蛊之祸) at the end of Emperor Wu's reign—a political upheaval that ultimately led to the Crown Prince's death—but they neglect the immense trust Emperor Wu had bestowed upon the Crown Prince over the preceding two decades. For instance, ever since the Yuanding era, Emperor Wu frequently went out on imperial inspection tours, and it was invariably the Crown Prince who remained in Chang'an to handle state affairs in the emperor's stead.

This point is not only unimaginable in a polity based on hereditary rule, but it is hard to fathom even in modern democracies today: what politician would allow someone with opposing political views to inherit their enterprise? The only explanation is that this politician also acknowledged that change had to occur.

If we assume Emperor Wu believed that all systems must remain unchanged after his death, then there is absolutely no way to explain why this shrewd politician granted the Crown Prince the colossal power to oversee the state (监国) for over 20 years. He could not possibly have been creating trouble for himself purely out of nothing.

Other evidence also refutes this assumption. For example, the *Biographies of Gongsun Hong, Bu Shi, and Er Kuan* (《公孙弘卜式儿宽传》) records the divergence between Bu Shi (卜式) and the emperor. Bu Shi, highly skilled in management and having donated his family fortune to the state, was appreciated by Emperor Wu and promoted all the way to the high position of Grandee Secretary (御史大夫).

However, when Emperor Wu later appointed Sang Hongyang (桑弘羊) and others to implement state monopoly policies to expand fiscal revenues, Bu Shi fiercely opposed these measures that competed with the people for profit. When a drought occurred, he even stated: *"If only Sang Hongyang were boiled alive, Heaven would send down rain"* .

Later, when Bu Shi submitted a memorial requesting the cessation of the salt and iron monopolies and the abolition of the taxes on carts and boats (车船税), Emperor Wu did not agree, but neither did he entirely reject it; he only abolished the taxes on carts and boats.

(Later, while translating this manuscript, I realized that a potential historical factual error might exist here. Although my memory indeed retains documentary records suggesting that "Emperor Wu of Han relaxed the collection of the tax on carts and boats around the first year of the Yuanfeng era (110 BC)," and identical assertions persist within the Chinese internet to this day, I genuinely cannot currently locate an explicit documentary source. Whether this is an error in my personal memory, or whether the relevant records reside within certain highly obscure documents, remains a subject for future investigation. What is relatively certain, however, is that the *Gao Min* (告缗)

decree was factually abolished during the Yuanfeng era, and the predation upon civilian wealth was somewhat mitigated.)

Subsequently, using the imminent Feng and Shan Sacrifices and Bu Shi's lack of literary skill as pretexts, the emperor *"demoted him in salary/rank to Grand Tutor to the Crown Prince"* (贬秩为太子太傅).

There are three extremely important pieces of information here:

First, although the emperor generally disagreed with Bu Shi's memorial, he did not oppose it entirely, as he immediately abolished the cart and boat taxes, while retaining the salt and iron monopolies, which had already become a vital source of state revenue.

Second, during the Han Dynasty, the Grand Tutor (太子太傅) and Junior Tutor (太子少傅) to the Crown Prince were unlike the sinecures of the late Chinese Empire; they were genuine officials of the Eastern Palace (东宫属官)—teachers, friends, and key ministers to the Crown Prince, capable of exerting massive influence over him. Later, when Liu Ju raised an army in rebellion, it was precisely upon the advice of his then-Junior Tutor, Shi De (石德).

Third, although "demoted in salary to" (贬秩为 / *Bianzhi wei*) and "demoted to" (贬为 / *Bian wei*) differ by only a single character, their practical meanings are poles apart. Generally speaking, "demoted to" means a genuine demotion where the person will no longer be given vital appointments. However, "demoted in salary to" seems to merely emphasize a transfer from a position with a higher salary to one with a lower salary, without implying a loss of favor or important utilization.

This point is completely corroborated by records in the *Book of Han*. The term "demotion in salary" (贬秩) does not appear frequently in the *Book of Han*, but its usage is remarkably consistent in meaning. For instance, slightly earlier in the *Biographies of Zhang, Feng, Ji, and Zheng* (《张冯汲郑列传》), it records that Zheng Dangshi (郑当时) was also once "demoted in salary".

The reason was that, serving as the Right Inner Administrator (右内史) in charge of the capital environs, he initially agreed that Dou Ying (窦婴) was right during a court debate regarding the conflict between Dou Ying and Tian Fen (田蚡), but later backtracked and said it seemed incorrect. This ambiguous attitude enraged the emperor, who subsequently "demoted him in salary to

Supervisor of the Household" (贬秩为詹事). *(Here, the Supervisor of the Household was the highest-ranking official among the Empress's subordinates; the empress at the time was Empress Chen).* Yet shortly thereafter, he was promoted to Grand Minister of Agriculture (大司农), overseeing the economy until his death; the man who succeeded him was none other than Sang Hongyang.

Even from the perspective of salary, this punishment was little more than a slap on the wrist. Naturally, a Supervisor of the Household could not compare with the Nine Ministers (九卿) in rank, nor with the Right Inner Administrator in actual power, but it still belonged to the major tier of "Two Thousand *Dan*" (二千石) and involved responsibilities within the palace. It is evident that Emperor Wu merely wished to give Zheng Dangshi a warning, and very soon appointed him to the highly powerful Nine Ministers position of Grand Minister of Agriculture.

From this incident, we can easily see that although Emperor Wu would sometimes express great displeasure with officials over certain matters, as long as the official was genuinely talented and the emperor truly needed him to accomplish things, the punishment was merely symbolic. Bu Shi's case should undoubtedly fall into this category.

Combining this with the special nature of the position of Grand Tutor to the Crown Prince, we can easily understand the purpose of this arrangement. Obviously, Emperor Wu also did not believe that such an intensely high degree of extraction (汲取) from society was sustainable. Once the realm was pacified, it would require a gentle monarch like the Crown Prince, alongside a minister like Bu Shi who knew how to cherish ***Minli*** (***people's physical capacity and labor*** / 民力), to govern and restore production.

Compared to the image of a paranoid and obstinate despotic monarch, Emperor Wu actually knew exactly when to advance and when to retreat throughout his life, and his methods were sufficiently flexible.

For example, Canghai Commandery (沧海郡) was the first territory he expanded into after ascending the throne, but when he deemed that maintaining control over it at that time was not worth the cost, he abandoned it after merely two years. From the beginning of his reign, Emperor Wu valued the pioneering of the Southwest region. However, once this investment conflicted with the northern campaigns against the Xiongnu, he would heed his chancellor's advice, temporarily halting the southwestern expansion to pour all efforts into crushing the Xiongnu.

When the crises deepened in his later reign, Emperor Wu once granted immense power to the Embroidered-Uniform Envoys (*Xiuyi Zhizhi* / 绣衣直指) and the Director of Retainers (*Sili Xiaowei*

/ 司隶校尉). But after the Disaster of Witchcraft, he quickly realized that such power possessed an uncontrollable destructive force. Therefore, in his twilight years, he appropriately curtailed the power of these censorial officials and made no attempt to institutionalize secret police politics (特务政治).

On one hand, we can see Emperor Wu's consistently hardline attitude as a ruler when facing popular uprisings. But on the other hand, we also discover that, as a ruler, he possessed an immense enthusiasm for understanding voices from various corners of the populace. A representative event was the creation (or perhaps the massive expansion of an already existing institution) of the Music Bureau (*Yuefu* / 乐府). Today, when we read the *Han Yuefu Poetry Collection* (《汉乐府诗集》), we can still find numerous poems opposing court policies and directly voicing the hardships of life.

Of course, the most direct evidence remains the *Luntai Edict* (《轮台诏》) issued by Emperor Wu. In this edict, the emperor publicly apologized for his erroneous decisions and promised to reduce harsh governance and restore production thereafter.

The above evidence all indicates that the unprecedented expansion of state power during Emperor Wu's reign was far more likely a temporary measure the emperor was forced to adopt when facing unprecedented ruling crises from both internal and external fronts. He had no intention of establishing an "eternal law for myriad generations" (万世之法) for posterity. There is no explicit indication of the emperor's viewpoint in the original documents of the Han Dynasty. As for the notion that Emperor Wu hoped to establish a rigid legal and institutional framework for future generations, this is merely the imagination of scholars subsequent to the Han Dynasty, lacking any solid evidence.

Naturally, China's unique geographical environment did indeed necessitate the state to maintain a significant demand for water conservancy and border defense in the ensuing years. Some argue that this objectively favored the survival of the Chinese *bureaucratic system* (a point that will be refuted later). However, had it not been for the acute intensification of internal and external contradictions in the latter half of the 2nd century BCE, it is highly unlikely that this long-standing influence could have led China down such a distinctive developmental path.

The final question is: why did such immense internal and external pressures happen to emerge precisely during Emperor Wu's reign? In particular, why did the Han Dynasty encounter such a formidable nomadic rival like the Xiongnu, while other ***classical states*** did not?

Leaving aside the climate issues of the Han Dynasty for now, as they remain inconclusive, regarding the Yellow River floods, my view is this: Since the early Western Han, the population in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River grew massively, leading to an increased demand for arable land. Residents on both banks of the Yellow River perhaps reclaimed the vast floodplains

brought about by the river's meandering into farmlands, thereby causing the Yellow River channel to narrow, ultimately resulting in breaches and flooding.

I make this judgment because the population growth and the acute sharpening of tensions regarding the *land-labor ratio* (人地关系) during the early Western Han are explicitly recorded in historical texts. Furthermore, the other major cause of Yellow River flooding—namely, the destruction of vegetation in the middle and upper reaches leading to a sharp increase in sediment load—clearly did not exist at the time Emperor Wu ascended the throne. This is because the vast majority of the middle and upper reaches of the Yellow River were in the hands of the Xiongnu, leaving no possibility for over-reclamation.

As for why the Xiongnu, the first nomadic empire in human history, emerged in the north of the Han Dynasty, I will attempt to offer an explanation. If we map out the extent of the ***Eurasian Steppe***, we can observe an exceedingly obvious fact: from Eastern Europe all the way to Northeast China, it is only in the northern region of China that the entire ***Eurasian Steppe*** comes closest to a center of *civilization* (文明) of the ancient world. In fact, there is a massive overlap in the frontier regions.

Eastern Europe was simply too far by land from the Apennine Peninsula, the Greek Peninsula, and Asia Minor, and was obstructed by mountains and rivers. To expect nomadic peoples to cross the Black Sea and migrate south would be asking too much.

The Central Asian region during the ***classical period*** also could not compare with the ***Middle Ages*** when irrigation systems were perfected. The large batch of the most renowned Central Asian strongholds of later eras were still over a millennium away from being founded. Consequently, Kazakhstan was also exceedingly distant from Persia and India.

Moreover, the nomadic center of ***East Asia*** and China were simply too close. Long before the Xiongnu grew powerful during the Qin and Han periods, agrarian residents and nomadic residents had a protracted history of interaction, records of which are exceedingly common in the poetry and histories of the Zhou Dynasty.

In the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》), Sima Qian recorded that the Xiongnu were descendants of the Xia Dynasty (夏朝), the first dynasty in Chinese history—which is to say, the Han people and the Xiongnu shared the same origin. Historical bonds and geographical proximity in reality dictated that interactions between nomads and Han-ethnicity regimes in northern China, whether peaceful or violent, were vastly more frequent than those between nomads and residents of centers of civilization elsewhere.

Whether before or after Emperor Wu, records of Han people fleeing to the Xiongnu (as well as to other northern nomadic tribes later on) and the Xiongnu (and other northern nomadic tribes) submitting to Han regimes are incessantly recorded in historical annals (史不绝书). Eaves tiles (瓦当) excavated from Xiongnu cities within modern-day Mongolia bear auspicious phrases identical to those of the Han Dynasty, merely swapping the "Emperor" for the "Great Chanyu".

I believe it was precisely this proximity between the Xiongnu and the Han—whether geographical, cultural, or economic—that ultimately forged the characteristics of the powerful Xiongnu Empire in the 2nd century BCE. And this nomadic empire, in turn, forced the Han Empire to undergo unprecedented changes. Once this change chemically reacted with the ***barbarians*** (蛮族) ***Entering the Pass (Ru Guan /*** 入关*)* following the collapse of the ***classical empire***, its impact would lead China down a unique (and perhaps disastrous) developmental path. *(More direct evidence regarding the Xiongnu obtained through textual research will be presented in Chapter 12, Section 25).*

Another month has passed like this, and I have at least found an explanation for why China formed an excessively strong *bureaucratic system* (官僚体制) during the ***classical period***—an explanation that, while far from perfect, possesses immense rationality when combining logical deduction with historical materials.

My personal residual concern is that in this explanation, the individual role played by Emperor Wu, Liu Che, is simply too massive, far exceeding the conventional sense of a hero. However, further reflection suggests that the Han Dynasty's successful counterattacks against regimes in all directions under Emperor Wu were by no means a historical inevitability.

For instance, we can easily see that among the world's primary civilizations (原生文明), not a single one besides the Chinese Empire entered the period of ***classical empires***. This is likely because their histories were too ancient, the internal resistance when facing changes was too great, and within limited territories, ***productive forces*** (生产力) might peak and then decline (in short, the ***productive forces*** diminished). Meanwhile, peripheral regions, influenced by civilization, gradually saw the rise of emerging regimes, forming an encircling posture around the primary civilization and constantly invading it. This situation was most evident in Mesopotamia (两河流域).

If we look at the situation when Emperor Wu took over the Han Empire—which lacked commanding national prestige at the time—it is not difficult to discover that he had fallen into the exact same predicament as the Sumerians. Breaking out of this disadvantageous situation required far more than merely "following the trend of historical development."

Emperor Wu possessed a distinct awareness of his own enterprise. He claimed that his exact intention was to *"use extraordinary men to achieve extraordinary deeds"* (以非常之人建非常之功). Judging from the duration he dominated the realm, accomplishing such an earth-shattering grand transformation was not impossible. Emperor Wu reigned for nearly 54 years, which originally made him the longest-reigning Han-ethnicity monarch in Chinese history. Even more noteworthy is that after his death, Huo Guang (霍光) continued his governance philosophy and acted as regent for 19 years.

Emperor Wu's reign and Huo Guang's regency combined to span three generations. This duration is long enough so that people living in its later stages could no longer intuitively understand what the world looked like before this era began. Furthermore, there was no historical education targeted at commoners or the lower-to-middle ruling classes back then. This meant that when Emperor Xuan finally took personal control of the government, anyone with historical memories of the Wen and Jing periods would be nearing ninety years old. For the inhabitants of this massive empire, imagining the world prior to Emperor Wu's reign had become exceedingly difficult.

(A most realistic example is North and South Korea; exactly 72 years ago, the Korean War had only just broken out).

Given sufficient time, as long as Emperor Wu possessed the extraordinary ability to execute a series of institutional changes and reforms in a relatively rational sequence, to systematically annihilate and crush the enemies that threatened China during the Wen and Jing periods, to historically reverse China's diplomatic status and initially form the tributary system (朝贡体系)—then he essentially reconstructed the entire nation, whether in terms of politics, economics, culture, military, diplomacy, or the consciousness of the people. And historical records indeed verify that he was exactly such an "extraordinary man".

Moreover, despite a lingering sliver of doubt regarding the conclusion, I remain generally confident in my deductive process. I feel this has evolved into a detective's deduction game. Once I determined that the Han Dynasty was the "first crime scene" (第一现场), I had to carefully inspect the scene, recording every object present and the information it conveyed. Then, just like in a game, I pinned this information on a blackboard, attempted to discover the correlations between them, and finally reconstructed the process of the crime and provided the motive. Procedurally speaking, I believe this two-thousand-year-old "case" can now be closed.

This also triggered my reflections on the "People's View of History" (人民史观 / History from Below) and the "Heroic View of History" (英雄史观 / Great Man Theory) frequently spoken of by Chinese people. Obviously, both are problematic.

The trajectory of history cannot be arbitrarily decided by one or two individuals acting as they please, because no matter how brilliant or capable a person is, they cannot divorce themselves from the social conditions of their time to accomplish a given enterprise. The "Heroic View of History" is certainly flawed.

Similarly, it is impossible that whatever historical event occurs is always the "choice of the people". Leaving aside whether the general populace genuinely cares about certain political affairs or possesses the ability to influence them, the people are fundamentally not a monolith (铁板一块); how could they possibly make a unanimous choice? The "People's View of History" is naturally problematic as well.

Our official historiography is fundamentally just political science. To justify the legitimacy of the regime, it doesn't care how absurd the reasons are. If something benefits "me," it is *"the choice of the people, following the popular will"*; if it disadvantages "me," then *"the people need to be indoctrinated, they need to be led"*. This can only fool idiots.

The reality of the situation is likely this: the people, as the aggregate of all societal members, collectively create specific social conditions, thereby providing historical possibilities. However, only an extremely small minority among the people possess the capability, opportunity, and luck to decide which option to choose among many with varying success rates and different outcomes. The members of society must then respond to the choices made by these "heroes," ultimately forming a combined force (合力) with nature—which is beyond human control—to determine the success or failure of that choice. And regardless of the outcome, history continues to move forward because of this. From a logical standpoint, this explanation is rational, and it indeed perfectly aligns with my observations of history.

Chapter 3: Under What Conditions Were Classical Empires Formed?

Although I observed long ago that a certain type of regime appearing in history could be classified as ***classical empires***, this was merely a categorization of facts. However, just as universal outcomes deserve universal explanations, since ***classical empires*** emerged universally across such vast temporal and spatial spans, this implies a high probability of a universal underlying cause. We cannot simply discuss individually how the Persians, Romans, Han Chinese, Magadhans, and Khmers each established an empire.

Yet, in late November, I suddenly realized several critical issues. When I was in school, the official political theory consistently emphasized that *"the state is a tool for the ruling class to exercise rule"* and *"the state serves the interests of the ruling class."* Such viewpoints unquestionably stem from Marx and Engels, the two communist mentors and founders of scientific socialism.

But this raises a question: if state policies are to reflect the overall interests of the ruling *class* (阶级), this actually requires a certain degree of political democracy—democracy *within* the ruling class, of course. Since the ruling class inevitably consists of more than one person, individual dictatorship would be curbed by the ruling class participating in politics.

Consequently, scholars quickly noticed a specific historical phase—namely, the period after the end of the ***Middle Ages*** and before the ***modern era***. During this period, a large number of despotic regimes emerged worldwide, with the power of monarchs expanding unprecedentedly compared to the past. These regimes are classified as ***Absolutist states*** (i.e., ***absolute monarchies*** / 绝对君主制), typified by France under Bourbon rule.

If we turn our gaze to Asia, the Tokugawa Shogunate (德川幕府)—which the Japanese refer to as an ***early modern state*** (近世国家)—clearly belongs to the same typology. Just like the Bourbon dynasty, the Tokugawa Shogunate even adopted measures to permanently concentrate regional lords in the capital or its outskirts, distancing them from their fiefs to strengthen centralization. *(By that time, I had explicitly realized that China's development had diverged completely from the West since at least the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, although the Ming and Qing dynasties appeared at first glance to be despotic empires, I could deduce that they could no longer be classified as* ***Absolutist states****).*

The most successful explanation for the universal causes of ***Absolutist states*** was provided by Engels. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (《家庭、私有制和国家的起源》), he pointed out that when the status of two successive ruling classes undergoes a transition, the government—especially the monarch at its apex—will possess the ability to balance between the old and new classes, thereby vastly expanding despotic power and strengthening centralization.

The process of ruling **class transition** is essentially one where a new *production mode* (生产方式) and mode of exploitation (if any) gradually surpass the old ones in efficiency (i.e., profitability). The old ruling class partially loses its original advantages and partially transforms into the new ruling class; simultaneously, some members who originally did not belong to the ruling class elevate themselves into the new ruling class.

Western scholars have already provided rather detailed explanations regarding the situation of ***Absolutist states*** in Europe, making further elaboration completely unnecessary. But what if we push Engels' explanation of ***Absolutist states***—which clearly emerged during the power transition period between ***feudal lords*** and the urban bourgeoisie—back by one historical epoch?

According to the official historiographical periodization our country learned from the Soviet Union's Stalin, the preceding transition should be the transition from the ruling class of a ***slavery society*** (奴隶制社会) to the ruling class of a ***feudal society*** (封建社会). But Stalin was obviously not a professional historian, and the richness of historical research back then cannot be compared to today. Now we know that the type of ***slavery society*** imagined by the Soviet Bolsheviks—a society consisting of nothing but slaveholders and slaves—did not actually exist.

In many regimes prior to the formation of ***classical empires***—such as the Greek city-states, the vassal states of the Spring and Autumn period, Babylon, and Egypt—there were many other people (most typically freemen / 自由民) living outside the binary identities of slaveholder and slave. Some engaged in commercial trade, some in handicrafts, and some were simply independent farmers, and so on.

However, this crude categorization was not entirely wrong in one regard: although the social structures of those regimes once considered ***slavery societies*** were in reality much more complex, their primary forms of exploitation were indeed bodily possession (人身占有) and forced labor. In other words, for those who were exploited, the vast majority were exploited in the form of "slavery."

Actually, the Chinese historiographical community are not fools either. They realized long ago that the slavery period was clearly more complex. Therefore, when I was in school, if the unification by the Qin Dynasty was mentioned, Chinese historiography generally referred to the opposing side as the ***old nobility*** (旧贵族) rather than constantly emphasizing their slaveholder attributes *(though propaganda works during the Mao era emphasized this heavily)*, having them appear in the narrative as evil villains opposing the righteous First Emperor.

At present, a rather compromised and rational narrative is that prior to the birth of ***classical empires***, there indeed existed such a ruling class within state regimes. They developed either from the chieftains of tribal clans, from the *priestly class* (祭司阶级) presiding over religious

ceremonies, or from military leaders born out of warfare. Together, they formed an aristocratic group within the state, possessing the divine aura of bloodlines and a hereditary ruling status.

Under the social conditions of that time, if this segment of the aristocracy wished to operate industries and expand their wealth, the most efficient method was undoubtedly to become major slaveholders.

As ***productive forces*** (生产力) continued to improve, social division of labor became more complex, and the influence of city-states surpassed that of the past. These aristocrats began to lose their monopoly over labor and the means of production (especially technology brought about by knowledge). They first lost their economic advantages, and subsequently lost their original political dominance.

In fact, when we observe Chinese history, it is exceedingly easy to notice this **class substitution** (阶级更替)—that is, the transition between the ***old nobility*** (旧贵族) and the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级).

A most universally known example is the so-called "Hundred Schools of Thought" (诸子百家). In Chinese history, this term broadly refers to the scholars and doctrines of numerous different schools during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The vast majority of the famous figures among them were descendants of these aristocrats, including Confucius (孔子), Guanzi (管子), Yanzi (晏子), Mencius (孟子), Han Fei (韩非), Shang Yang (商鞅), Mozi (墨子), Sun Wu (孙武), Sun Bin (孙膑), and Xunzi (荀子).

Simultaneously, we can also easily point out many thinkers and politicians who were not descendants of the aristocracy. Some of them even came from humble origins, including Zhuangzi (庄子), Huizi (惠子), Fan Li (范蠡), Su Qin (苏秦), and Zhang Yi (张仪). Although Lü Buwei (吕不韦) was allegedly the 23rd-generation descendant of Jiang Taigong (姜太公), he essentially entered officialdom by virtue of being an immensely wealthy *merchant* (商人).

By the Han Dynasty, thinkers primarily emerged from the newly rising ***landlord class***, represented by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒), Yang Xiong (扬雄), and others. *(This, of course, is also related to the fact that the pre-Qin aristocracy was massively annihilated during the wars at the end of the Qin Dynasty).*

If we shift our focus of observation from thinkers to politicians, this transition occurred even earlier. After all, the prerequisite for becoming a thinker is possessing a sufficient reserve of knowledge, which in the past was naturally monopolized by the aristocracy. Even something as seemingly simple today as writing was accessible only to the aristocracy and a small number of scribes. Although the popularization of knowledge and education occurred during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, it naturally possessed a certain time lag. Consequently, the identity of the officials responsible for practical affairs would complete this transition even earlier.

Now we can see from Chinese historical facts exactly how ***classical empires*** were formed.

When the economic and political status of the ***old nobility*** was successively weakened, it became difficult for them to maintain their previous privileged position of *"punishments do not extend up to the Grandees"* (刑不上大夫) vis-à-vis the vassal lords. Therefore, the outstanding individuals among the aristocracy and their descendants would seek to utilize their remaining advantages—namely, their grasp of advanced knowledge and political affairs—to enter the courts of the vassal kings and become bureaucrats in order to realize their ambitions.

As for the "new nobility" (新贵 / nouveaux riches) produced amidst social transformation—including newly rising landlords and shrewdly operating large merchants—seizing state power through armed struggle was still far too remote a prospect for them back then. The simplest way to expand their power and influence was also to join the courts of the vassal kings.

For the vassal king, he evidently welcomed this phenomenon as well. This meant that the monarch could easily counterbalance his ministers, rather than being checked by an aristocratic block possessing unified interests.

Simultaneously, the scrambling of both the old and new ruling classes to join the monarch's court allowed the monarch's bureaucratic ranks to expand unprecedentedly. This further strengthened the state's degree of centralization and the monarch's despotic power.

It was precisely this transformation that impelled the vassal kingdoms to launch annexation wars of ever-increasing scale, and allowed one of these regimes to overwhelm all others, ruling over a massive territory that predecessors had never managed to control. Thus, the ***classical empire*** was born.

The advantage of this explanation is that it not only maintains consistency with Western scholars' explanations of ***Absolutist states***, but it is also exquisitely validated in the history of China.

The political reforms and centralization of the Qin state were inextricably linked to these bureaucrats who originated either from the ***old nobility*** or the newly emerged classes. The reason Qin had the opportunity to go further than other vassal states is attributed to a cliché often cited by

historians: namely, Qin was adept at utilizing the *scholar-officials* (士人 / literati) from the other six states.

Although Qin was merely one of the seven major vassal states prior to unification, it managed to attract talent from the other six states who sought to make a mark for themselves. The emergence of this situation cannot simply be summarized by historical texts claiming that the monarchs of Qin were sagacious and cherished talent; it was clearly closely related to the actual conditions of the Qin state back then.

For instance, the economic and social development of the Qin region was relatively backward compared to the six eastern states. When drastic class upheavals in the six states produced a massive number of unattached scholar-officials wandering among the vassal kingdoms, such transformations had not occurred domestically within Qin. Consequently, the rulers of Qin naturally tended to recruit foreign scholar-officials, which served their own interests.

Additionally, during the final period of the Warring States era, the Qin state exhibited a highly significant political characteristic: its imperial relatives by marriage (外戚 / consort kin) hailed from foreign aristocracies and were politically immensely influential. Naturally, it was impossible for them to be entirely on harmonious terms with Qin's indigenous aristocracy. Thus, drawing in scholar-officials who similarly hailed from foreign states to serve as external support was perfectly normal.

However, the monarchs of Qin, especially Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇 / the First Emperor), completely failed to comprehend why the Qin state was able to establish an extractive system vastly more powerful than other nations. The Qin Empire conquered and annihilated the remaining six major vassal states in a mere nine years; its limited bureaucracy was fundamentally insufficient to support rule over such a massive expanse.

Consequently, as the situation deteriorated, Qin Shi Huang could only resort to increasingly brutal suppression. Yet the harsher the suppression, the more unwilling the intellectuals of the conquered regions were to cooperate, prompting them to seek the restoration of their former states. The situation then deteriorated further. The rapid demise of the Qin Dynasty is therefore utterly unsurprising.

After Liu Bang established the Han Dynasty, he absorbed the lesson of Qin's rapid demise. He vastly contracted the territories the empire needed to rule directly, and effectively restored the vassal kingdoms in the Guandong (关东) region—only now, these vassal kings were all royal kinsmen of the Liu clan. As China largely stabilized and production further developed, the Han Empire was able to move forward along the conventional historical trajectory of ***classical empires***.

Only by this time, the professional bureaucrats joining the imperial court were no longer the ***old nobility***, who had already been massively annihilated. Famous ministers of the early Han, such as Jia Yi (贾谊) and Chao Cuo (晁错), although their exact origins are not explicitly recorded, largely belonged to the newly rising ***landlord class***.

By the time Emperor Wu ascended the throne, the situation shifted again. This touches upon a historical controversy in Chinese history: the issue of the **"Inner Court"** (内朝) during Emperor Wu's reign.

The official explanation claims that Emperor Wu created the Inner Court, where the emperor and his close ministers made decisions, thereby weakening the power of the **"Outer Court"** (外朝— official historiography specifically emphasizes the Chancellor's Office / 丞相府) and enhancing despotic centralization. But this is actually a remarkably clumsy lie.

The Inner Court was not created by Emperor Wu to counterbalance the Outer Court; **it was, in itself, the standard royal court of a *classical state*. What was genuinely newly emergent was the Outer Court.**

Because the highly developed *bureaucratic system*—established through the reform movements during Emperor Wu's reign—compelled the classical royal court to "cede" a portion of its functions, it shrank back into what is referred to as the "Inner Court". It is fundamentally impossible to draw a clear institutional boundary between the Inner Court and the Outer Court, because the decline of the Han Dynasty's classical royal court and the comprehensive ascendance of the bureaucratic system was inherently a dynamic process.

During Emperor Wu's reign, China's ***classical society*** (古典社会) had not yet entirely perished, and he personally always possessed the discernment to recognize talent and the power to appoint personnel. Therefore, the key to judging whether someone originated from the Inner Court lies in observing their promotion trajectory: whether they caught the emperor's attention and received an extraordinary promotion (特擢).

A glaringly obvious fact is that it was precisely the Inner Court officials during Emperor Wu's reign, along with those dispatched from the Inner Court to the Outer Court (like Sang Hongyang), who conformed to the bureaucratic political operations of a ***typical classical empire***. That is to say, the monarch did not select officials according to a mature set of selection rules, but relied on intuition and personal preference to appoint people from vastly different backgrounds to serve as advisors or top provincial officials. **Whether unintentionally or deliberately, this achieved a counterbalance among various social strata, thereby allowing the monarch's power to expand.**

If we observe those close ministers during Emperor Wu's reign, we will find that their identities varied wildly. Han Yan (韩嫣) was a descendant of the monarch of the Han state; Ji An's (汲黯) family had served as officials for generations; Kong Anguo (孔安国) was a descendant of Confucius; Sang Hongyang hailed from a merchant background; Ni Kuan (倪宽) came from a poor family; Bu Shi made his living through animal husbandry; Wei Qing was originally a riding slave; Huo Qubing was already a member of the consort kin when promoted; Huo Guang entered officialdom through hereditary privilege (恩荫); Shangguan Jie (上官桀) gained appreciation as an imperial guard officer; Jin Midi (金日磾) was even a surrendered Xiongnu prince.

Many of these identities were actually despised by the mainstream social opinion of the time. For example, although the romance between Sima Xiangru (司马相如) and his wife Zhuo Wenjun is praised today, he was after all suspected of building his fortune using his father-in-law's wealth. As for merchants and slaves, it goes without saying.

The ideological and political leanings of these Inner Court officials were equally disparate. For instance, Bu Shi and Sang Hongyang stood in absolute opposition; Ji An adhered to the Huang-Lao (黄老之学 / Daoist) school; Zhang Tang (张汤) leaned toward Legalist methods and punishments (刑名法术); Ni Kuan, although a Confucian, studied the Old Text (古文经学) rather than the orthodox New Text (今文经学) of the time. Sima Qian, although acknowledging Confucianism, held views wildly divergent from the emperor's. There were even more various *Fangshi* (方士 / alchemists and esoteric practitioners) belonging to the Yin-Yang school. As for someone like Dongfang Shuo (东方朔), his ideas were so unconstrained and eccentric that one simply could not pin down which school he belonged to.

These bizarre heretics within the court were not only not prohibited, but were even permitted and supported in disseminating their own ideologies. For instance, Kong Anguo taught Old Text Confucianism while serving as an official. The Old and New Text schools coexisted peacefully throughout Emperor Wu's reign, but became the central topic of political struggle in the late Western Han—a protracted debate that was only finally resolved by the evidential research scholars (*Kaoju* scholars / 考据学家) of the Qing Dynasty.

Another major feature of the Inner Court was that, under the emperor's encouragement and support, a vast amount of literary and artistic creation took place. Sima Xiangru developed the Han *Fu* (汉赋 / Han rhapsody) to maturity; Sima Qian wrote the immortal *Records of the Grand Historian*; Yu Chu wrote China's first novel, the *Zhou Shuo* (《周说》); Li Yannian (李延年) composed and

adapted numerous musical pieces; and even the *Cuju Jing* (《蹴鞠经》 / *Classic of Cuju* [ancient Chinese football]) was born during Emperor Wu's reign—even a specialized work on kicking a ball was published.

Emperor Wu himself was full of enthusiasm for such vibrant cultural creation and sponsored it unsparingly. He was an outstanding poet and literatus himself, ranking among the top Chinese rulers in history regarding his massive contributions to arts and literature.

Actually, it is not difficult to discover that these attendants of Emperor Wu, rather than being called close ministers, are often better described as *Menke* (门客 / retainers or guest-scholars) reminiscent of the Warring States and early Qin-Han periods. A court with such a complex source of personnel, such ideological pluralism (百花齐放), and such intensely active creation never appeared again from the time of his death right up to the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty.

This further reflects the fact that the ***classical state*** (古典国家), in the general sense, terminated precisely during Emperor Wu's reign. That is to say, the so-called Inner Court was itself the result of the inward shrinking of the late Warring States to early Han style court—the classical Chinese royal court. Its mode of operation actually conformed to the general laws of historical development.

In contrast, an Outer Court with a unified ideology and an institutionalized system for official selection and promotion was the true anomaly in historical development; it was the genuine "newcomer." How, then, could it be a case of "using the Inner Court to control the Outer Court"?

Another very direct piece of evidence is that after Emperor Wu, the Inner Court actually continued to shrink and eventually disappeared, rather than expanding. After Huo Guang's (霍光) death, there was never again a team with such diverse origins, active thinking, and decisive power surrounding the monarch to assist in state governance *(on the other hand, the need to cope with a multitude of internal and external affairs, as in Emperor Wu's reign, no longer existed either)*.

And Huo Guang himself, despite holding supreme power, still did not usurp the Liu clan's realm, but dedicated his wisdom and courage to the very end. There was never again a powerful minister quite like him, to the extent that in the eyes of posterity, he is ranked alongside Yi Yin (伊尹) of the Shang Dynasty.

This absolutely cannot be explained by personal morality. In reality, Huo Guang was the last powerful minister under a general-sense **classical *bureaucratic system*** in Chinese history. The zenith of his power was inextricably bound to the trust and mandate of the imperial family; he could not secure the support of the **"Chinese-style bureaucratic system"** (中式官僚体系) that formed after Emperor Wu.

The heterogeneity of the ***classical bureaucratic system*** meant that a powerful minister had to rely on the monarch's authority to hold power, because he would not gain the endorsement of a highly cohesive bureaucratic system sharing identical interests and objectives from top to bottom. Unless he genuinely demonstrated an ability sufficient to awe the entire realm into submission, usurpation was nearly impossible. Thus, not usurping the throne was the rational choice dictated by political structure, not by morality.

Powerful ministers starting from Wang Mang (王莽), however, were able to take over the emperor's control over the bureaucratic system after reaching the pinnacle of officialdom, and seize state power with the support of the bureaucrats. This transformation in circumstances exacerbated the mutual suspicion between monarch and ministers, drastically altering China's political ecology after the Han Dynasty.

By the Eastern Han, although Emperor Guangwu (Liu Xiu) wished to strengthen monarchical power using the *Shangshu Tai* (尚书台 / Imperial Secretariat), the Chinese-style bureaucratic system had already matured over the century since Emperor Wu. The emperor's personal understanding and living environment were also vastly different from the early to mid-Western Han.

At this point, the emperor's so-called "Inner Court" had to rely either on eunuchs (宦官)—who, being physically and personally mutilated, could only attach themselves to the monarch—or on dividing a faction of bureaucrats to act as confidants *(most commonly the empress's family, what Chinese call consort kin /* 外戚*)*. After all, these monarchs were surrounded by professional bureaucrats from their youth. This was a far cry from the ***classical bureaucratic system*** in the general sense, and in terms of efficacy, it was extremely difficult to achieve the purpose of strengthening monarchical power.

A genuinely significant political emergence of "using the Inner to control the Outer" (以内制外) should not be dated earlier than the Southern Dynasties period. Its hallmark should be the phenomenon of *"scholars from humble origins managing confidential state affairs"* (寒门掌机要) during the Liu Song (刘宋) period. Interestingly, the monarch who exerted the greatest influence on political systemic change at that time was also surnamed Liu, and shared the exact same posthumous title with Liu Che: "Xiaowu" (孝武). However, these are matters for later, to be specifically researched in the future.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the political policies during Emperor Wu's reign and the formation of the Chinese *bureaucratic system* (官僚体制) were, initially, highly conducive to ***feudalization*** (封建化). This encompasses at least three points.

First, Emperor Wu himself ruthlessly struck out against the remnants of the *slavery system* during his reign. We do not even need to concern ourselves with his personal ideological leanings. The sheer fact that male and female slaves (奴婢) were universally present within the empire *(there is currently no precise estimate, but if I take a median value, it would be 1/10 of the total population)* was highly detrimental to the empire's ability to mobilize more manpower and wealth for military and other purposes.

Leaving aside the fact that slavery becomes an inefficient mode of production and exploitation once ***productive forces*** reach a certain level, many slaves were not even used for productive purposes but purely for elite enjoyment.

Thus, we can observe that during Emperor Wu's reign, numerous measures were taken regarding the slave issue. First, shortly after ascending the throne, he pardoned a group of people who had been relegated to slavery because they were implicated in the Rebellion of the Seven States *(naturally, this was more of a political posture)*. Then, he hoped that powerful families and wealthy households would voluntarily hand over their slaves to the court in exchange for becoming Gentlemen of the Palace (郎官), but this obviously attracted very few people.

Consequently, Emperor Wu decided to employ heavy-handed methods directly against those guys who *"refuse to assist the state in its emergencies"* (不佐国家之急). Through the implementation of *Suanmin* (算缗 / property tax on merchants) and *Gaomin* (告缗 / encouraging the reporting of tax evasion), he bankrupted almost all the wealthy households nationwide and confiscated tens of thousands of slaves.

Lastly, the court also did not want slaves to be arbitrarily killed by their masters simply because they had absolutely no legal status, as this too destroyed ***productive forces***. Dong Zhongshu had once proposed that those who privately killed slaves must also be punished *(Treatise on Food and Money /《食货志》)*. Factually speaking, Emperor Wu indeed accepted this advice, because the earliest records in our country of treating the private killing of slaves as a punishable crime appeared during his reign *(Table of the Princes Made Marquises /《王子侯表》 & Table of Those Made Marquises Since the Jianyuan Era /《建元以来侯者年表》)*.

Of course, one cannot assume that all these slaves confiscated by the government were emancipated into independent farmers. In reality, the *Treatise on Food and Money* records that the majority were dispatched to serve the government. However, this attitude of publicly curbing the keeping of slaves was undoubtedly a deterrent to those hoping to purchase them.

Second, agricultural production experienced tremendous progress during Emperor Wu's reign. Its iconic achievement was the popularization of iron tools and ox-drawn plows across China, while water conservancy irrigation and planting methods were also drastically improved.

Today, we can no longer accurately determine exactly how much China's agricultural yield per *mu* (亩) increased before and after Emperor Wu, because data prior to his reign is exceedingly scarce. Chao Cuo claimed that an adult laborer could cultivate 100 Han *mu* (if calculated by the small *mu*, this equates to 14-15 modern Chinese *mu*).

From scattered descriptions of fields in the *Treatise on Rivers and Canals* (《河渠书》) and the *Biographies of the Money-Makers* (《货殖列传》), we can deduce that the yield per *mu* of high-quality land at the time did not exceed 400 *jin* (although Sima Qian did not specify the exact crop). However, in the *Fan Shengzhi Shu* (《氾胜之书》 / *The Book of Fan Shengzhi*) from the late Western Han, the yield per *mu* of broomcorn millet (黍) had already reached 470 *jin*.

Naturally, the specific yields of various crops in the Han Dynasty cannot be verified with absolute precision. Yet we can perceive the agricultural progress of the time from a highly indirect angle: during Emperor Wu's reign, the empire's population was only slightly over 30 million; but by the end of the Western Han Dynasty, it had nearly doubled, reaching 60 million. The elevation of agricultural ***productive forces*** clearly favored the development of the small-peasant economy and strengthened the economic power of the newly rising ***feudal landlord class***.

Third, a comprehensive and mature *bureaucratic system* could provide the ***landlord class*** with a more convenient avenue to enter officialdom. Therefore, compared to typical classical bureaucratic empires, the Western Han Empire could absorb the ***landlord class*** into political decision-making much faster and in vastly greater numbers, which in turn further augmented the strength of the ***landlord class***.

In fact, we can distinctly see that among the various ***classical empires***, China's ***classical period*** was actually remarkably short. From Emperor Wu basically finalizing the institutional framework to the mid-Eastern Han, feudal manors (封建庄园) had already become extremely prevalent nationwide. Only two centuries had passed during that time! And by the late Eastern Han, feudal relations had become exceedingly widespread *(though immature)*; subordinate officials (掾属) of high-ranking regional administrators referred to their superiors as *"Lord"* (主公). This took a mere 300 years!

Such a rapid transition was something Rome, Persia, and other nations could not even begin to compare with.

However, it was precisely because the Chinese *landlord class* stepped onto the historical stage so effortlessly—without undergoing brutal struggles—that it inevitably engendered a kind of weakness (软弱性), a propensity for compromise (妥协性), and an ideological inertia (思想上的惯性). Ultimately, as a causal factor, this led to the result that although China entered the track of *feudalization* earliest, it never reached the finish line.

At this point, people will certainly still harbor doubts regarding whether it is rational to define ***classical empires*** as the transitional political system from *slavery states* (if such a term is appropriate) to feudal states. After all, it is only within Chinese literature that considerably explicit evidence exists.

Regarding this issue, I believe that, on the one hand, the volume of historical literature from our country's *pre-feudalization* (前封建化) period is extraordinarily abundant compared to the same period in other parts of the world. It is entirely possible that the exact same phenomenon existed elsewhere in the world, but was simply not recorded or the texts have been lost.

On the other hand, the reason this transition became so glaringly obvious in China—while perhaps inherently less pronounced elsewhere—stems from specific causes. I will mention these differences respectively in various subsequent sections and provide a concentrated explanation in Chapter XII.

And just like that, the universal causes for ***classical empires*** have been provided, and the historical record regarding the nature of the Inner Court during Emperor Wu's reign has been set straight (拨乱).

Simultaneously, however, I grew increasingly apprehensive. I increasingly felt that Chinese history is saturated with lies, and that these lies appear so pervasively in the education of the people.

If these lies are unintentional, then what exactly has our country's historiography been researching for the past thousands of years? If some of these lies are intentional, then the situation is even more terrifying: **who is trying to cover up what?**

Regardless, by late November, my anxiety had indeed deepened, and this anxiety was about to become reality.

Chapter 4: About Japan

On December 7, the epidemic control measures that had lasted for three years were suddenly revoked. Public policy here remains as ridiculous as in the past. There is no need to believe a single word, because any given sentence could *"no longer hold any practical relevance"* the very next day, and all the costs are borne solely by the ordinary people.

The powerful industrial capacity boasted over and over again during the past thousand-plus days and nights suddenly vanished. Not enough medicine, not enough masks, not enough hospital wards; it was hard to see any difference from those "failed states in fighting the pandemic" living in abysmal misery that the *Xinwen Lianbo* (national evening news / 新闻联播) reported on day and night.

It was precisely in such absurd times that most people around me, myself included, caught COVID-19 once, and then recovered within a few days, except that the sore throat lingered a bit longer.

Taking advantage of this period when everyone was sick, I simply put aside the academic materials I couldn't comprehend. I increasingly felt that I had reached the end of my academic path. I secured a recommendation for graduate school in October, but I was already acutely aware that I probably lacked the capability to pursue a Ph.D. in mathematics. My family did not support it either, so combined master-doctoral programs or direct Ph.D. programs were even less necessary to consider.

During the final days of epidemic control, I began to ponder the history of Japan, because early on I had noticed that the history of Japan—perhaps China's most important neighbor aside from Mongolia—possesses a highly pronounced uniqueness.

Moreover, this uniqueness is easily linked to its national conditions. Japan and China are neighboring countries; from around the Common Era to today, whether in peace or war, interactions have been continuous. Japan started relatively late and historically studied China for a protracted period. Even today, many of the cultural products that serve as Japan's international calling cards originally stemmed from China.

But on the other hand, Japan today is a developed ***capitalist country*** (资本主义国家), boasting a standard of living that leads Asia, advanced science and technology, and an excellent international image. Furthermore, over the century and a half since the Meiji Restoration, Japan has indeed politically accomplished *"Leaving Asia and Entering Europe"* (*Datsu-A Nyū-Ō* / 脱亚入欧), and the values recognized by its citizens are now virtually indistinguishable from those in Europe and America.

This implies that Japan can form two distinct control groups with China and the West, respectively. Researching the differences in the historical trajectories of these three might just be the key to clarifying how ***modern society*** (现代社会) was born.

Among the widely recognized developed countries and regions in the contemporary world, excluding microstates, they either experienced the **Eurasian Great Migrations** (欧亚民族大迁移) following the end of the ***classical era***, or were formed through overseas colonization since the Age of Discovery *(including today's Taiwan region of China)*. The sole exception is Japan. This highly ethnically homogeneous country neither went through the Eurasian Great Migrations nor was formed from colonies.

This single characteristic alone demonstrates that if anyone wishes to understand how ***modern society*** was formed, it is impossible for them not to study the history of Japan.

Moreover, as mentioned in previous records, the official post of Grand Governor of the Capital Environs (*Jingji Dadudu* / 京畿大都督) during the Eastern Wei period is extremely similar to the *Rokuhara Tandai* (六波罗探题) of the early Kamakura period. This makes Japan's ***feudalization*** (封建化) a highly worthy historical event to study.

Because I do not understand Japanese, I read the domestically translated Chinese versions of Kodansha's *A History of Japan* (10 out of the 26 volumes), Iwanami's *History of Japan*, and the University of Tokyo's *History of Japan*. I was indeed profoundly struck by the professional caliber, academic ethics, and achievements of Japanese scholars; they have already researched their own country's history extremely thoroughly.

Thanks to the monumental enterprise achieved by these predecessors, I am able to utilize the history of Japan as such a clean and bright mirror for China. If the Japanese back then considered the history of the Kamakura Shogunate to be the *"Mirror of the East"* (*Azuma Kagami* / 《吾妻镜》或称《东鉴》), then the entire history of Japan will also serve as China's *"Mirror of the East."*

1, Japan's Tang-Style Reforms Were Too Radical: The External Introduction of a bureaucratic system Prior to the classical period

Japan's early history lacks extensive historical records (what little exists is mostly found in Chinese historical sources). The most glaringly obvious characteristic discernible is its rapid progress.

Particularly during the Yayoi period (弥生时代)—spanning roughly 300 BCE to 300 CE, a mere six centuries—the Japanese archipelago comprehensively achieved the popularization of rice-paddy

agriculture, the introduction of bronze and iron implements, the emergence of a textile industry, the formation of an ***early state*** (早期国家) regime, and interactions with China.

It should be pointed out that Japan's rapid development during this period aligns with the general situation of peripheral regions during ***the zenith of classical empires***; it was the result of the dramatic expansion of the Chinese Empire's influence during the five centuries from the Qin to the Western Jin dynasties. The progress of Japanese society could not have occurred without a massive influx of *Toraijin* (渡来人 / continental immigrants).

Starting from the end of the Western Jin, China entered a period of north-south division—the Eastern Jin, Sixteen Kingdoms, and Northern and Southern Dynasties periods—where ethnic minorities flooded into ***the Central Plains***, and ***feudalization*** (封建化) deepened further.

Building upon the foundation of the previous era, Japan formed the Yamato state (大和王权 / Yamato Kingship). On the one hand, it still maintained diplomatic ties with the Southern Dynasties of China; on the other hand, it continued deep interactions with regimes on the Korean Peninsula. During this period, the Yamato state already possessed the capability to construct massive engineering projects like the *Kofun* (古坟 / megalithic tombs), established the *Uji-Kabane* system (氏姓制度 / clan and hereditary title system) to integrate powerful families into state politics, and encountered Buddhism, a world religion. These changes laid the foundation for the next stage of studying the Chinese Empire to implement reforms.

During the Asuka (飞鸟), Nara (奈良), and Heian (平安) periods, Japan dispatched nearly 20 delegations of envoys to the Sui and Tang empires. Their objective was to understand and learn the political systems and social culture of the Chinese Empire. The reason the Japanese court persisted in this policy for nearly three centuries may initially have been the desire to attain recognized international status *(which, in the political reality of **East Asia**, obviously meant being recognized by China)* and as a reaction to losing ground on the Korean Peninsula.

However, its fundamental cause lay in the fact that Japan had developed to the social stage of transitioning from an ***early state*** to a ***classical state*** (古典国家), possessing an internal drive to establish a ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制) and expand state power.

Yet, it is precisely here that the first problem arises. Japan certainly had a tendency to move toward a ***classical state***, but whether it needed to do so *so early* and *so intensely* (i.e., having to rigidly model itself after China's *Ritsuryō* state / 律令国家) is clearly subject to immense doubt. I do not know whether Japanese scholars failed to notice this or intentionally avoided the issue *(after all,*

denying a phase of one's own country's historical development is certainly more difficult in public discourse than finding justifications for it).

First, let us look at the initial issue: what were the respective domestic social conditions in the two countries on the eve of Japan's gradual adoption of the Tang Empire's systems?

In reality, even before becoming a *Ritsuryō* state, the systems Japan had groped its way toward *(undoubtedly also referencing regimes in the southern Korean Peninsula)* were not a blank slate. Systems such as the *Kuni no miyatsuko* (国造 / provincial administrators), *Miyake* (屯仓 / royal estates and granaries), the *Uji-Kabane* system (氏姓制度), and the *Be* system (部民制度 / occupational groups) had already taken shape.

Japan's *"Great King who rules all under heaven"* (*Ame-no-shita Shiroshimesu Ōkimi* / 治天下大王 —that is, the later Emperor) completely possessed the ability to extract tribute and taxes from all over the kingdom and subject the commoners to corvée labor, while local magnates (地方豪族) were also absorbed into the kingdom's rule.

What I wish to point out is that although *(some—whenever I mention this, I mean a portion, as what I can read are just some classic works translated domestically)* Japanese scholars believe this royal power structure was extremely primitive, or even merely an exclusionary regional power bloc, it was not necessarily all that backward for the "classical" stage.

Japanese scholars argue that because a monistic (一元化) monarch-subject structure had not formed beneath the King of Wa (倭王), the Taika Reform (大化改新)—and subsequent reforms—were imperative.

However, a "monistic" structure was never an inevitable prerequisite for a *classical empire* to begin with. These scholars have clearly been strongly influenced by *Toyo Shigaku* (东洋史学 / Japanese academic study of East Asian, primarily Chinese, history), mistakenly adopting China's special case as a universally applicable standard. **An overly complete and aggressively powerful bureaucratic system emerged anomalously in China during its *classical period*; other *classical empire*s inherently did not need to possess one.**

If we consider Japanese society on the eve of the promulgation and implementation of the *Taihō Code* (《大宝律令》) at the end of the 7th century CE, then aside from the Chinese Empire and the Roman Empire, the developmental level of Japan's ***classical bureaucratic system*** could no longer be said to be inferior to that of (early) Iran, (early) India, or the Khmer.

Therefore, assuming we exclude continental influence, it is highly doubtful whether the Japanese archipelago had any internal demand to develop an even more powerful political system. The fact is, once the potential military threats from the Tang Empire and Silla (新罗) distinctly vanished, the Heian court shed the high state of military readiness under the *Ritsuryō* system almost without any burden. For the next two centuries, the entire country remained at a low level of military activity, right up until the *Samurai* (武士) rose to power locally.

China, on the other hand, had developed into a bizarre stage that deviated from the normal historical trajectory. This is what foreign observers consider the rapid reconstruction of state capacity in the ***Early Middle Ages*** (中世纪早期), or what the West calls the "**First Great Divergence**" (第一次大分流). However, I clearly designate it as the ***Restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期).

The system of the Sui and Tang empires during this period was by no means a simple repetition of the Qin and Han ***classical empires***, because the ***social foundation*** (社会基础)for its establishment had drastically changed. Regardless, by the 7th century CE, the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) already dominated economic production. The Tang emperors could no longer seek despotism through balancing acts like their Qin and Han counterparts; instead, they had to suppress the ***landlord class*** through institutional design. In fact, throughout the Tang Dynasty, the policy toward the aristocratic great clans (士族) was indeed one of simultaneous utilization and precaution.

The core of this policy very likely inherited **"*The Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise*"** (地主-官僚妥协), which had matured during the previous dynasties (the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Northern and Southern Dynasties) targeting the ***barbarians*** who had *Entered the Pass (**Ru Guan**)*. That is to say, it sought to weaken the local dominance of the aristocratic great clans, while providing them with compensation within the bureaucratic system (i.e., ***co-optation through official ranks and stipends*** / 官位荣禄收买).

More importantly, the *Ritsuryō* state was built upon a reactionary push against the tide of ***feudalization*** (封建化). Therefore, its policies appeared so radical as to be almost inconceivable. The most representative measure among them was the Equal-field system (均田制), where the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) attempted to directly control the distribution of the means of production.

The reason such radical measures could be adopted during Emperor Xiaowen's reign was, fundamentally, because years of perennial warfare in the North led to massive amounts of

abandoned land. The two successive upheavals of the Revolt of the Six Garrisons (六镇起义) and the chaos at the end of the Sui Dynasty unexpectedly prolonged the lifespan during which the Equal-field system could survive.

However, once entering the Tang Dynasty, the situation relatively stabilized, and the bureaucratic government could no longer possibly have that much land to distribute. It had no way of manufacturing the basic unit of rule—the small-peasant household—through such a direct method.

From the very beginning, the Equal-field system did not involve the institutional confiscation of the massive landlords' land. The logic here is also exceedingly simple: if the court were to go so far as to seize the means of production from landowners for redistribution, then in the eyes of the landlords, how much would this behavior differ from ***feudalization*** itself? The court was absolutely unwilling to face fierce resistance.

Therefore, I must emphasize that while the Sui and Tang empires certainly achieved a bureaucratic restoration, their attempt did not mature all at once. Trying to use state power to directly distribute the means of production to establish a long-running foundational institution was simply a naive fantasy.

It was the Song Dynasty that truly pushed the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** to maturity. Chinese rulers realized that the brilliance and essence of the **bureaucratic system** (官僚体制) lay in being detached from production (脱产). They found a path to maintain bureaucratic rule and continuously strengthen the monarch's dictatorial power merely by indirectly controlling the means of production. Over the total 289-year history of the Tang Dynasty, the time during which the *Ritsuryō* state could operate normally was actually less than half. This system was unworkable even in China.

Japan, meanwhile, faced social conditions completely different from those of the Tang Dynasty. Japanese scholars themselves admit that, let alone anything else, even the household registration system (户籍制度)—the cornerstone of the *Ritsuryō* state—was extremely difficult to implement in Japan at the time. This was because, at the time of the *Ritsuryō* reforms, the Japanese archipelago did not even possess "families" (家庭) like those in the Tang Dynasty.

This was inevitable, because during the Tang Dynasty, the grassroots of society had indeed achieved ***feudalization***, whereas the entirety of Japan was still full of clans and *Be* occupational groups (氏族部民). Therefore, I believe that under such massive social disparities between the two countries, claiming that Japan absolutely had to reform by mimicking the Tang Dynasty is entirely absurd.

Secondly, judging from the ultimate outcome of the *Ritsuryō* reforms, the question of exactly what Japan learned—and did not learn—from China becomes even more fascinating.

The imperial examination system (科举制), as a "fundamental grand law" perfected during the Tang Dynasty, was a powerful weapon for despotic monarchs of the restoration period to combat the aristocratic great clans. But in Japan, it proved utterly useless.

Because Japan had not even entered the ***classical period***, clan aristocrats were still active on the political stage. Even from the perspective of the downward diffusion of knowledge, implementing the imperial examinations in Japan fundamentally lacked a suitable target audience; the only people who possessed the knowledge to participate were the aristocrats themselves. Therefore, shortly after this system was introduced to Japan, it existed in name only (名存实亡).

Similarly, the eunuch system (宦官制度) found no soil in Japan. The imperial family and the powerful clans (primarily the Fujiwara clan / 藤原氏) were practically in-laws for generations. The relationship between the two sides was overall stable, hence there was no need to strictly guard and defend the inner palace (后宫).

From the perspective of official titles, although the Japanese envoys to the Tang indeed arrived at the Tang Dynasty and attempted to replicate the Tang bureaucratic system, we can still discern obvious elements of ***the Han System*** (汉制) within it.

For example, the post of *Dainagon* (大纳言 / Major Counselor), which evolved from the Grandee Secretary (御史大夫) during Emperor Tenji's (天智天皇) reign, had a "Tang alias" (唐名) of "Secondary Chancellor" (亚相). As is widely known, the Grandee Secretary in the Han Dynasty was viewed as the alternate or understudy for the Chancellor.

An even more famous example is the title *Kampaku* (关白 / Regent). In China, this term was earliest used to refer to the political decision-making power of Huo Guang—the chief minister entrusted with the care of the young emperor upon Emperor Wu's death. Furthermore, the elegant alias for *Kampaku* in Japan, "Haku-roku" (博陆), originates directly from Huo Guang's own noble title, Marquis of Bolu (博陆侯).

Locally, the increasingly complex bureaucratic system of the Tang Dynasty was clearly neither what Japan needed nor what it could imitate. Transport, censorship, and state monopolies could not be

executed in Japan back then. Local governance relied on the *Kokushi* (国司 / provincial governors). This situation, where local officials concentrated various powers in their hands, was much more akin to the Grand Administrators (太守) of the Han Dynasty than the Regional Inspectors (刺史) of the Tang.

In fact, the Japanese indeed referred elegantly to the *Kokushi* and even the later *Daimyo* as "Taishu" (太守)—though this likely violated the court's ritual protocols. Perhaps it was precisely because the *Kokushi* of various *Ritsuryō* provinces originally possessed relatively concentrated local power that the formation of *Zuryō* (受领 / contract governors) and *Fumyō* (负名 / named taxpayers) during the Heian period transitioned relatively smoothly under the harsh *Ritsuryō* system, thereby opening the path to the ***feudal political system*** (封建政治制度).

From the perspective of cultural history, the "time lag" (时差) between China and Japan is also extremely fascinating.

For example, the term "Shogunate" or "Bakufu" (幕府) in China referred to the administrative headquarters of top regional military commanders, and those serving within were aides or staff members (幕僚). In China, the *Bakufu* system took shape during the Qin and Han, and was most active during the climax of ***feudalization***—the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. When this vocabulary spread to Japan, it later became the symbol of the feudal regime established by the *Samurai*.

Another artifact that left an extremely profound impression on me is a type of clothing, known in Chinese as *Liangdang* (两裆 / a two-piece tunic). There is a pottery figure from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period wearing this attire in the Shaanxi History Museum. This vest-like garment was equally prevalent during the Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties, which was the ***zenith of feudalization***. By the time the envoys to the Tang arrived in the Chinese Empire, it had already lost its former glory, and by the Song Dynasty, it had vanished completely.

In Japan, however, the shape of the *Liangdang* was resurrected in the *Kariginu* (狩衣 / hunting robe) that emerged during the Heian period, although there is no evidence of a direct lineage between the two. When viewed from the front, a high-ranking Japanese *Samurai* or *Kuge* (公卿 / court noble) wearing a *Kariginu* looks as if they are wearing a *Liangdang* over their clothes.

I previously downloaded the complete series of *Taiheiki* (《太平记》) from Baidu Tieba and watched it several times; in the show, Ashikaga Takauji (足利尊氏), played by Hiroyuki Sanada,

frequently appears in this attire after becoming the Shogun. The reason this shape was preserved was ultimately because it suited the needs of the *feudalized* aristocracy for martial exercises and hunting. Additionally, armor modeled after the *Liangdang* shape was also highly popular in *Buke* (武家 / warrior family) society.

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China, aristocratic women who took Buddhist vows and became nuns were often respectfully addressed as "Nun So-and-so" (某某尼). Japan retained this custom, and it was also most common in warrior society. As late as the Sengoku period, the mother of Imagawa Yoshimoto (今川义元) was still known as Jukei-ni (寿桂尼).

It is precisely this "time lag" exhibited in Japan's protracted interactions with China that clearly and explicitly reflects the temporal disparity in the historical trajectories of the two countries.

Finally, I believe there is one more piece of evidence indicating that Japan's adoption of Tang Dynasty systems for reform during the Asuka and Nara periods was unnecessary: namely, the typical, genuine classical Japan exhibited a certain "delay" (滞后).

What does this mean? The ***classical empire*** I refer to here is a centralized state formed during the transition from a clan-based aristocratic society to a ***feudal society***. Consequently, the bureaucrats and intellectuals of a ***classical empire*** often possess complex origins in their identities, which itself is an important manifestation of "class balancing" (阶级平衡).

However, during the reforms of the 7th and 8th centuries CE, such a situation did not yet exist in Japanese society. In reality, when the Chinese **bureaucratic system** was transplanted, the absolute majority constituting the bureaucrats were the original clan aristocrats. This in itself was highly bizarre.

For example, the extraordinarily renowned aristocratic Fujiwara clan (藤原氏) in Japan was originally called the Nakatomi clan (中臣氏), which belonged to the **priestly class** (祭司阶级) in charge of religious ceremonies. According to the general course of historical development, accompanying the advancement of production, the diffusion of knowledge, and the very changes in religious beliefs themselves, when a society enters the ***classical period***, this ***stratum*** (阶层), even if not entirely stripped of power, should at least severely decline.

Yet, the Nakatomi clan capitalized on the nationwide trend of Tang-style reforms in Japan, defeated their enemies in political struggles, and integrated themselves into the bureaucratic system,

eventually becoming the absolute zenith of the *Kuge* (公卿 / court nobles). This in itself is quite legendary.

The key reason why such seemingly bizarre events could occur is that Japan's "classical system" appeared far too early. It was not that they were naturally entering the ***classical period*** by the 7th and 8th centuries; rather, under external influence, they prematurely transplanted the bureaucratic system. Meanwhile, back then, the ***old nobility*** like the Nakatomi clan were still highly active on the political stage, thereby managing to occupy vital positions within the bureaucratic system.

If we cast our gaze further down the timeline, the evidence becomes even more glaring. During the final nearly one hundred years of the Heian period, the *Insei* (院政 / Cloistered Rule) system emerged, directly terminating the nearly century-long Regency politics (*Sekkan Seiji* / 摄关政治) of the Fujiwara clan.

Under the *Insei* system, the retired emperor held power in the capacity of a *Jōkō* (上皇 / Cloistered Emperor) or *Hōō* (法皇 / Cloistered Emperor who has taken Buddhist vows), while the *Kuge* and hundreds of officials waited with fear and trepidation for him to issue *Insen* (院宣 / edicts from the cloistered emperor).

Japanese scholars have clearly noticed two points.

First, when the *Jōkō* implemented *Insei*, he would promote a group of close attendants (*Kinshin* / 近臣). The identity origins of these close attendants were extremely complex, and their personnel appointments frequently breached the general conventions of the aristocratic state *(i.e., the default rules of the early to mid-Heian period)*. Relying on the *Jōkō*'s trust, these close attendants attained astonishing power and wealth, provoking much criticism among the *Kuge*, who could only sigh in helpless resignation.

Second, the emergence of *Insei* occurred later than the *Samurai* (武士) stepping onto the historical stage. In fact, Japanese scholars can very easily point out that the *Samurai* themselves were part of the *Jōkō*'s political balancing game. For instance, the *Hokumen no Bushi* (北面武士 / Northern-facing Warriors) was the military force supporting the *Insei* of Cloistered Emperor Shirakawa (白河法皇).

Even during the 30 years prior to the Genpei War (源平合战), this political balance itself already had to be struck between the Minamoto (源) and Taira (平) *Samurai* clans. The Taira clan regime—peaking with the despotism of Taira no Kiyomori (平清盛)—became the *"Tōryō of the Buke"* (武家栋梁 / Head of the Warrior Houses) precisely under the sponsorship of the *Jōkō* for the purpose of suppressing the Minamoto clan *(the quotation marks indicate that the title did not match the reality)*.

However, because the *Samurai* had already acquired an absolutely dominant position in the nation's military by the 12th century, and their self-awareness was gradually germinating, the *Jōkō*'s balancing act failed very quickly. Thus, when Minamoto no Yoritomo (源赖朝) seized state power, Japan immediately entered the ***Chūsei*** (中世 / ***Middle Ages*** or ***medieval society***).

These two points actually fully demonstrate that the *Insei* of the late Heian period was the typical classical politics. On the one hand, its bureaucratic origins necessarily possessed breadth and complexity, while the selection of close attendants relied on the ruler's personal will. On the other hand, **class substitution** (阶级更替) can only occur after the ***landlord class*** steps onto the historical stage. This is exactly why *Insei* could only emerge after the *Samurai* had gained vital positions in state politics.

If we look at this from the perspective of economic circulation, this point is similarly corroborated. Although there were considerable official interactions between Japan and the Tang Dynasty in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, Japan's external international trade was not highly developed.

It was not until the late Heian period, particularly its final stage when Taira no Kiyomori (平清盛) held power, that Japan's foreign trade exhibited the prosperity typical of the ***classical period***. Not only was the trade volume massive, but the commodities also became more diversified (for instance, Japanese handicraft products like folding fans entered China). The massive influx of Song Dynasty copper coins into Japan illustrates the development of Japan's ***commodity economy***.

This phenomenon becomes quite reasonable if we explain it by suggesting that when Japan transplanted the Chinese bureaucratic system, it still needed time to reach the ***classical society***; it initially lacked the social conditions for prosperous commercial activities, which were only gradually realized by the late Heian period.

If we follow the current general understanding and view the Nara and Heian periods as classical Japan, then the ***typical classical period*** merely accounted for little more than its final one-fifth of the time. In fact, although the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate allowed the *Samurai* to mature politically, it did not alter the status quo of Japanese society operating under the *Shōen-*

Kōryō system (庄园公领制 / estate and public land system) since the late Heian period. This resulted in the ***classical era*** leaving a tiny "tail" more than a century after the end of the Heian period—namely, the Kenmu Restoration (建武新政) advocated by Emperor Go-Daigo (后醍醐天皇).

Japanese scholars have likewise noted that although Go-Daigo himself used *"Unification under the Court Nobles"* (公家一统) as his slogan, the personnel supporting his regime similarly had complex origins and were promoted based on their intimate relationships with the emperor himself. *(The Kodansha book references Amino Yoshihiko's /* 网野善彦 *concept of the "Heteromorphic Kingship" /* 异形的王权*).*

Go-Daigo himself did not respect the general rules of *Kuge* (court noble) society, to the point that Kitabatake Chikafusa (北畠亲房)—serving as the main pillar of the Southern Court—expressed deep regret in his *Jinnō Shōtōki* (《神皇正统记》 / *Chronicle of the Direct Descent of Gods and Sovereigns*) when discussing the emperor's "reckless decrees" (乱命).

One of the most astonishing examples occurred in December 1334, when Emperor Go-Daigo appointed *Kuge*, including incumbent ministers, as the lords of the Eight Ministries (八省卿). This practically negated the bureaucratic political logic inherited from the Tang Dynasty—that is, the various practical administrative departments are first responsible to the chancellor, and then the chancellor is responsible to the emperor.

Emperor Go-Daigo had absolutely no need for the Council of State (议政官会议) to assist or obstruct him. He turned the ministers and all officials below them entirely into practical administrative officials, making them execution organs to realize the emperor's will. Emperor Go-Daigo wished that both the *Zasso Ketsudansho* (杂诉决断所 / Board of Miscellaneous Lawsuits) serving as his think tank and the political institutions serving as execution organs would belong exclusively to himself. This line of thought bears an uncanny resemblance to Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋) half a century later.

The aforementioned facts indicate that Emperor Go-Daigo's Kenmu regime was essentially still a regime based on classical logic. However, let alone lasting for a generation, he could not even sustain it for three years. This is because although the shadow of the *Ritsuryō* system remained, the *Samurai* had already indisputably risen as the new masters of the state; the emperor had no room left whatsoever to manipulate class balances.

Since the tail of classical Japan survived until such a late date, it is evident that in the distant era of the 7th and 8th centuries, the Japanese archipelago was still far from the stage of spontaneously forming a ***classical state***. *(However, I later discovered that Japan's situation was far from outrageous. During Iran's classical phase spanning more than 11 centuries in the pre-Islamic period, the* ***typical classical society*** *only existed in the final 150 years).*

In other words, when Japan's history reached the 7th and 8th centuries CE, without being prepared to enter the ***classical state***, Japan forcibly introduced the *Ritsuryō* system—a new system generated during China's stage of bureaucratic restoration. This is akin to a healthy person taking an excessively potent medicine *(later I discovered that the "medicine" of the Ritsuryō system was, in reality, essentially a poison)*.

Why did the rulers of Japan do this? On this specific issue, my personal opinion is no different from the Japanese scholars I have read: namely, that in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, Japan indeed felt a severe military threat from the East Asian mainland.

I merely point out, **building upon the foundation of Japanese scholars**, that this severe military threat ostensibly originated from the extremely high intensity of warfare throughout the Tang Dynasty, but fundamentally, it was the product of the ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚制度复辟).

Because if ***feudalization*** had continued after the migrations of ethnic minorities, the organizational capacity of ***early medieval society*** would have still been very weak. The scope of personnel and material circulation might have receded compared to the ***classical period***, and the intensity of warfare would have been maintained at a rather low level.

Yet in China, none of this occurred. The ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) was resurrected through such forceful means as the laws and regulations of the *Ritsuryō* system (*Lü Ling Ge Shi* / 律令格式). The Tang Empire was able to invest hundreds of thousands of men into border expansion wars. In particular, the Tang Empire's intervention wars on the Korean Peninsula not only completely crushed the Japanese army in pitched battles but also, alongside Silla, exerted colossal pressure on Japan.

In fact, the impact of the Tang Dynasty's foreign wars clearly rippled beyond Japan. If we accept the "time lag hypothesis" (时差假设) that China, as the center of East Asian civilization, originally led the various peripheral sub-centers in the stages of social development, then when the Sui and Tang empires rose, regimes in a predicament similar to Japan's were clearly not limited to just one.

In fact, when we observe two of the Tang Empire's most significant frontier adversaries—the Tubo (Tibetan Empire) and Nanzhao—it is not difficult to discover exactly how the Tang Empire's military pressure affected China's frontiers.

In the Yunnan region, *slavery states* already existed as early as the Qin and Han periods. After several centuries of development since the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the local society was undoubtedly striding toward a ***classical society***. The rise of the Tang Dynasty massively accelerated this process. In reality, we know today that Nanzhao similarly modeled its politics, economy, and military after ***the Tang system*** (唐制), thereby mobilizing massive armed forces to confront the Tang Empire.

As for the Tibetan Plateau, due to its late start and harsh environment, the society there was even more backward. When the Sui and Tang empires rose, it was, at best, in the stage of a general (slavery-based) ***early state***. However, driven by the pressure and advanced technologies from the Tang Dynasty, Tubo also rapidly hyper-inflated into a centralized slavery empire, becoming the Tang Dynasty's most powerful foreign enemy during its middle period.

For the neighbors of the Tang Empire, the military, political, economic, and cultural influence of the Tang Dynasty caused them to prematurely inflate into classical-form empires. Consequently, the social mutation that occurred in the Chinese interior during the late Northern and Southern Dynasties *(where it did not continue along the path of **feudalization**, but veered toward a bureaucratic restoration)* spread to China's periphery alongside the influence of the Tang Dynasty.

For example, when we observe the demise of the Tubo Empire, we note a highly unique event: a nationwide great slave uprising. This illustrates at least three points: **First**, the Tubo Empire was a prematurely hyper-inflated classical-form empire, where slavery remained the primary mode of exploitation. **Second**, a slave uprising that destroys an empire across such a vast ruling expanse is exceedingly rare in the world, indicating that the Tubo Empire had excessively extracted social resources during its protracted foreign wars. **Third**, while rebellions certainly occur in the late stages of ***classical empires***, it is very difficult for the empire itself to be directly destroyed by them. The reason is that the already ***feudalized landlord class*** will use the momentum of suppressing the rebellion to augment their own power, exactly as occurred during the Yellow Turban Rebellion at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Tubo, however, possessed absolutely no capability to contain the prairie fire of the uprising. This demonstrates that its society was still very far from ***feudalization***; there simply were no ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) who could step forward to handle the situation, to the extent that after the Tubo central government collapsed, the entire territory descended into stateless anarchy.

Based precisely on this observation, we can say that although Japan's choice to conduct comprehensive reforms modeled after the Tang Dynasty during the Asuka and Nara periods was bizarre from the perspective of Japan's own developmental trajectory, considering the historical reality emerging in the East Asian region at the time, one must admit that this choice possessed a certain inevitability.

What happened next can be called a genuine heroic saga in human history.

Regardless of the extent to which Japan failed to completely replicate the centralized system of the Tang Dynasty, after passing through the Nara period, Japan's bureaucratic rule—due to studying China—remained significantly stronger than that of ***typical classical states***.

When reading relevant materials, I was profoundly astonished by some of the ideologies and reflections generated in Japanese society at that time, because even today, I can still sense their existence in China.

For instance, during the early Heian period, the Japanese court's attitude toward its borders was virtually identical to that of the Chinese Empire: if ***barbarians*** crossed the border and migrated into the empire, they must have been moved by the virtue of the Son of Heaven. The court never spared the wealth and labor of the people (民脂民膏) to grant them favorable treatment. However, if the empire's own commoners attempted to cross the border and head to "filthy" uncivilized lands, it was deemed treason; if caught, they were severely punished without leniency.

In reality, back then, there were indeed many commoners—registered households under the *Ritsuryō* system—who fled to areas controlled by the Emishi (虾夷) because they could no longer endure the court's cruel oppression. How remarkably similar this is to the Han-ethnicity commoners on China's northern frontier fleeing beyond the Great Wall!

Yamanoue no Okura (山上忆良), a Japanese poet of the Asuka and Nara periods, can be called the conscience of intellectuals. He himself suffered no great calamities as an official; although not fast, he promoted steadily within the bureaucratic system and maintained a very deep personal friendship with Ōtomo no Tabito (大伴旅人), the Dazaifu Commander (太宰帅 / a high regional official). Yet, Okura did not become a defender of the existing system. His poetry consistently stood on the side of the masses, unreservedly depicting the suffering of the people under the *Ritsuryō* system.

Not only did he live earlier than China's Du Fu (杜甫), but he was also far more ideologically progressive. Okura never shied away from the fact that the people's suffering originated from the court itself, whereas Du Fu always veiled his critiques (遮遮掩掩).

It was precisely under such a harsh social environment—and without having experienced the historical event of the Great Migrations to provide an external motive for ***feudalization***—that the Japanese *Samurai* terminated bureaucratic rule purely from within. This transformed Japan, during the centuries following the mid-Heian period, into a ***feudal society*** similar to that of Western Europe. The sheer caliber of this magnificent achievement goes without saying.

Japan's history reminds me of an interesting story I once read, which took place on Pohnpei, the island where the capital of the present-day Federated States of Micronesia is located. This island likely sat along the path of Austronesian expansion into the Pacific.

A story circulates on Pohnpei that before the 12th century, the earliest settlers had already landed on the island, though they were still in a tribal society at the time. Around the year 1100, a group of conquerors distinctly different from the locals arrived on the island via canoes. They brought something the islanders had never seen before—namely, a government—and established the Saudeleur Dynasty.

This new regime constructed magnificent megalithic structures, using what is now the World Heritage site of Nan Madol as its capital. Naturally, this inevitably brought oppression. The regime forced the people to offer massive amounts of food to the spirits as tribute, making local class differentiation increasingly pronounced.

The ruled populace began continuous attempts at resistance, such as assassinating the king and stealing tributes. Sometime in the 17th century, the rule of the Saudeleur Dynasty finally became completely unsustainable. It is said that a hero conquered this kingdom; centralized state rule was abolished, and several large tribes co-ruled the island.

Pohnpei is extremely small, and the history that occurred there is quite simple to recount. However, it clearly illustrates what happens when an overly advanced social system is forcibly introduced into a region incapable of supporting it.

The overall direction of Austronesian migration was from west to east. When later migrants set sail from the coast of the Asian continent, they were likely already accustomed to the morphology of an ***early state*** (早期国家). They found it difficult to realize that when sailing eastward to Pacific islands, restricted by the island's size and accompanied by a loss of technology, maintaining their original social form in the new territory was simply unfeasible.

Fundamentally speaking, although Japan is vastly larger than Pohnpei, its historical encounter was exactly the same.

Furthermore, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) of the Sui and Tang empires had absolutely nothing to do with being "advanced"; it was entirely a tumor (肿瘤) grown on the "organism" (机体) of human society. Japanese society lacked the conditions to allow this tumor to grow unchecked, and the Japanese Samurai subsequently waged a resolute struggle against it. Consequently, the Japanese archipelago ultimately returned to the normal trajectory of historical development.

2, What Factors in Japanese History Favored Feudalization?

Regarding the historical process of the *Samurai* rising to power and seizing the regime, Japanese scholars have already researched it in exhaustive detail. Building upon their foundation, I will record here what I consider to be the favorable factors that emerged during Japan's ***feudalization*** process.

First, although Japan prematurely introduced the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) from China, it was indeed far too early for Japan. The emperor lacked the conditions to unleash the true potency of this despotic polity because, at that time, Japan's clan aristocrats remained powerful; it was far from the decaying scene of a class-transition phase.

This meant that the emperor's actual power in state politics was inevitably checked and constrained by the bureaucratized aristocracy. Nothing represents this situation better than the *Sekkan Seiji* (摄关政治 / Regency politics) of the mid-Heian period.

As a result, even though the Japanese emperors attempted to enhance their power using the Chinese system, its despotic color *(at least from my perspective as a Chinese person)* was simply too faint.

Despotism (专制) and bureaucracy (官僚) are two concepts inextricably linked. To strengthen his despotic power, a despotic ruler cannot do without a complex **bureaucratic system** to co-opt, divide, and suppress strata that might pose a threat. Conversely, the more powerful the bureaucratic system *(in the eyes of Chinese, a purely "official-centric" /* 官本位 *society)*, the more powerful the despotic power becomes.

This phenomenon is very easy to understand in China. Because power is only responsible to its source, and in a bureaucratic society, members' socio-economic status heavily depends on their position within the bureaucratic system—where their power is derived from superiors—if one traces this upward layer by layer, state power will inevitably be monopolized in the hands of an absolute few.

Since the ancient Japanese emperors did not possess such strong despotic coloration, Japan's bureaucratic system was consequently weakened, because the Japanese had no need, unlike the Chinese, to ultimately be responsible to a single emperor. Japan's *Ritsuryō* reforms did not merely expand the emperor's power; powerful clans represented by the Fujiwara likewise expanded their interests nationwide by virtue of their expansion within the bureaucratic system. This meant that the *Ritsuryō* reforms did not exclusively benefit the monarch alone.

In fact, when observing Japan, many people only see the emperor being of an *"unbroken imperial line for ages eternal"* (万世一系), but easily overlook that the *Kuge*—whose ranks were determined by their family status (家格)—also accompanied the imperial system from beginning to end.

Therefore, it was impossible for the emperor to lord over the masses and *"decide the affairs of the realm with a single word"* (一言以决天下事) like his Chinese counterparts. Although endowed with unparalleled divinity, in practical politics, he was merely the **"aristocrat among aristocrats"** (贵族中的贵族)—the one with the highest rank among a multitude of nobles.

A relationship of competition and confrontation still existed between the emperor and the aristocratic *Kuge*, which created a relatively friendly environment for the rise of the *Samurai*. Not only did the *Samurai* avoid becoming public enemies right from the start, but they were also able to profit from both sides to strengthen themselves.

(Here it must be emphasized that although Japan's Heian period and China's Southern Dynasties both appear to be dynastic states where aristocrats occupied vital positions, their natures were fundamentally different. The aristocrats of the Heian period originated from the clan aristocrats initially formed since class differentiation; however, the so-called aristocrats of the Six Dynasties in Jiangzuo / 江左六朝 were themselves massive landowners formed since ***feudalization***, as China's clan aristocrats had already been largely annihilated during the Qin-Han transition).

Due to the lack of a history of strong despotism, the Japanese cared very much about "public consensus" (公论). This inertia of adopting collegial deliberation (合议) in decision-making evidently favored the unfolding of ***feudalization***.

When reading the history of the Heian dynasty, one thing left a profound impression on me: the Japanese always meticulously and methodically considered the rights and responsibilities of any given matter. This is unimaginable for a resident like me, living in a society under prolonged bureaucratic rule.

Although official laws of various dynasties in China were not entirely heedless of the equivalence between rights and obligations, in China, who genuinely takes principles seriously? Even in today's news, ambiguous phrasing like *"relevant authorities"* (有关部门) remains rampantly popular, yet surprisingly, the vast majority of the billion-plus souls do not find it strange.

The clear equivalence of power and responsibility should undoubtedly be one of the foremost political principles. But once power is concentrated in the hands of an individual despot, even the simplest logic makes it clear that this principle will inevitably be impossible to execute.

Because even if there is no upper limit to the power a single person can exercise, the responsibility they can bear is always finite. The emperors of China would mutter, *"If there are sins in the myriad regions, the sin rests on my person alone"* (万方有罪，罪在朕躬); Emperor Chongzhen (Zhu Youjian) issued edicts of self-condemnation (罪己诏) six times in the 17 years before the fall of his state. Yet, let alone genuinely punishing themselves, if they simply continued to act willfully, who could do anything about it?

Thus, in the final years of the Chinese Empire, power became increasingly concentrated at the top, while responsibilities were increasingly distributed at the bottom. **When speaking of benefits, the common people disappeared; when discussing costs, not a single one was spared.** This is what inevitably occurs when despotic bureaucratic totalitarianism develops to a certain degree.

When the taxation logic of the mid-Heian Japanese court shifted, it is genuinely inconceivable to me how smoothly and explicitly rights and obligations fell upon the shoulders of the *Zuryō* (contract governors) and *Fumyō* (named taxpayers). It is evident that in Japan, the bureaucratic system did not destroy fundamental political principles, and this too alleviated the difficulties the *Samurai* faced in seizing power.

Second, the rise and fall of the *Ritsuryō* state possessed a distinct "time lag" (时差) compared to Japan's own historical trajectory. This refers to the point mentioned earlier: classical Japan in the typical sense was actually only the *Insei* (Cloistered Rule) era of the late Heian period. Yet, by the end of the 11th century CE—when *Insei* stepped onto the historical stage as a political model—Japan's *Ritsuryō* system had, in fact, long existed in name only.

Although I harbor an extremely approving attitude toward the magnificent achievements of the *Samurai*, I must admit that while the statement *"the Samurai defeated the aristocratic bureaucrats in a feudal revolution"* is formally correct, in specific terms, it was not the *Samurai* who forced the *Ritsuryō* system to its dead end. The rise of the *Samurai* occurred later than the collapse of the *Ritsuryō* system.

The logic behind this is not complicated. The very birth of the *Ritsuryō* system in China was originally the stress response of the monarch and the **bureaucratic system** against ***feudal lords*** (封建领主). Even as a type of bureaucratic system, it was inherently immature, and it was even impossible for it not to possess certain characteristics of a ***feudalized*** (封建化的) era—such as the aforementioned government directly controlling and distributing the means of production (i.e., the Equal-field system).

Once this naive fantasy was transplanted to Japan, the situation became even more bizarre. The Japanese court now also intended to implement the *Kōchi-Kōmin* system (公民公地制 / system of

public land and public citizens), but its stage of social development could not possibly produce a sufficient number of **detached bureaucrats** (脱产官僚) to keep the policies operational, as the Tang Dynasty had.

No matter how infinitely powerful a policy appears, executing it practically ultimately requires human hands. In the 7th and 8th centuries CE, the only entities within Japan capable of formally accomplishing this task were the powerful aristocrats, like the Fujiwara clan.

Since the task of distributing the means of production had to be accomplished through these powerful aristocrats, it was fundamentally impossible for the court—or the emperor—to prevent them from encroaching upon the land. Under such circumstances, the *Ritsuryō* state actually accelerated the formation and expansion of feudal manors (庄园).

The manors owned by the imperial family, aristocrats, and major temples/shrines (寺社) were massive in number and widely distributed. These exalted manor lords (庄园主) had neither the willingness nor the capability to manage and maintain them. The *Samurai* stepped onto the stage as the personnel handling manor affairs for these noblemen and famous temples.

Therefore, when the *Samurai* moved to the forefront of history, their identity was that of **collaborators** with the power-holders, not **antagonists**. This point is extremely worthy of note. Although the *Samurai* are ultimately remembered by posterity as Japan's ***feudal lords***, the people who could originally be termed "***feudal lords***" in Japan were perhaps precisely those manor lords who were eventually replaced by the *Samurai* in the long river of history.

Third, throughout the Heian period, Japan's external geopolitical situation was highly favorable to ***feudalization***.

Exhausted from coping with a gradually collapsing frontier situation and frontier warlords (藩镇 / *Fanzhen*) slipping out of control following the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang Empire could no longer pose any realistic threat to Japan.

By the time the Song Dynasty was established, the further consolidation of the **bureaucratic system** resulted in the people of the Chinese Empire replacing any foreign ethnic group as the greatest imaginary enemy of the Chinese rulers. This transformation was manifested in the diplomatic realm as a gradual conservatism; it was impossible for the empire to frequently launch interventionist and expansionist wars as it had during the Han and Tang dynasties.

Ever since the state of Balhae (渤海国), the economy of China's Northeast region further developed, and newly rising ethnic minority regimes continuously established themselves or

expanded into this area. Clashing with Korean regimes expanding northward, the Koreans were also forced to shift their military focus to the north.

For an island nation suspended overseas like Japan, these changes in circumstances undoubtedly meant a massive alleviation of military pressure, thereby providing the conditions for the massive disarmament during the Heian period when *"peace prevailed at home and abroad"* (中外无事). The situation of universal peace not only rendered the *Ritsuryō* state's extraction of manpower and wealth utterly unjustifiable, but also handed the task of domestic "security wars" (治安战争) over to the newly rising *Samurai*.

However, this low-intensity warfare did not mean a complete absence of war. For the majority of the Heian period, Japan consistently strengthened its control over the Tohoku (东北) region, and the conquest of the Emishi (虾夷) existed as a long-term enterprise.

Looking back in hindsight, as opponents of the Japanese regime, the strength of the Emishi was absolutely perfect. They were neither so strong that defeating them required massive military mobilization capabilities, nor so weak that a few dozen or a hundred pioneer settlers could waltz in as if entering an unpopulated land. If the Japanese court was to cope with the war against the Emishi, its most effective and low-cost option was to rely on the *Samurai*.

For the *Samurai*, the Emishi were neither so strong as to be utterly invincible or require an exorbitant price for victory, nor so weak that a mere armed parade would secure an immediate triumph. The reality is that the *Samurai* were thoroughly tempered and hardened in the wars against the Emishi. They not only learned combat techniques from their opponents—for instance, the later world-renowned *Katana* (武士刀) evolved from the weapons of the Emishi—but it was precisely during these protracted battles that the master-vassal relationships (主从关系) inherent to the *Samurai* were forged, and the prestige of the Minamoto clan as the *"Head of the Warrior Houses"* (武家栋梁) was established.

It was also in war that land-based rewards for meritorious service (恩赏) began to form, and the self-awareness of the *Samurai* awoke. In the domestic wars and the Emishi subjugation campaigns centered around the Kanto (关东) and Tohoku regions, the power of local *Samurai* bands continuously expanded, laying the foundation for the *Buke* (warrior) regime centered in Kamakura in the days to come.

Fourth, the geopolitical situation of the Japanese archipelago also favored the unfolding of ***feudalization***.

First, simply by opening a map, one can notice that the entire archipelago extends from southwest to northeast in a long and narrow shape. The straight-line distance from the southernmost part of Kyushu to the northernmost part of Honshu is nearly 1,500 kilometers.

If we draw a circle with such a radius centered on Xi'an or Luoyang, almost all the core ruling areas of China would be included within the circle. If we draw the same circle centered on Shiraz, modern Iran and Iraq would be entirely within it. If centered on Patna, the vast majority of the Indian subcontinent (excluding the southernmost tip) would fall inside this circle.

This fully demonstrates that the diameter of the Japanese archipelago posed a massive challenge to regime administration itself, and the mountainous terrain made this challenge even greater.

Although Japan, as an island nation, is no stranger to seafaring, the sea conditions in the Western Pacific are extremely complex. The difficulty of connecting the archipelago via maritime navigation is far beyond comparison with the Mediterranean, which has a long seafaring tradition.

In fact, as late as the Nanboku-chō (Northern and Southern Courts) period, when Prince Noriyoshi (义良亲王 / later Emperor Go-Murakami of the Southern Court) attempted to travel by sea between Yamato (大和) and Mutsu (陆奥), he was thwarted by storms. Once land routes were cut off, the Southern Court quickly lost control of Eastern Japan.

Corresponding to the narrow and long shape of the country is the unidirectional nature of its foreign interactions. Although Hokkaido had direct exchanges with what is now the Russian Far East across the sea during the Neolithic era, for Japan up until the ***Chūsei*** (中世 / ***Middle Ages***), the vast majority of technology, wealth, and personnel came from the West—first through the Korean Peninsula, and later through direct interactions with China.

This also meant that internal economic development in Japan was uneven. Overall, the level of social development and ***productive forces*** (生产力) gradually declined from west to east, because advanced technologies invariably first appeared in the west and required time to spread eastward.

The plains suitable for population agglomeration in Japan are sparsely distributed along the coast. Among them, the largest—the Kanto Plain (关东平原)—happens to be located in eastern Japan. However, considering historical reasons and environmental factors (especially logistics), the ruling center of the *Ritsuryō* state was established in Kyoto, in western Japan.

The dispersion of local power and the uneven development across regions made it extremely difficult for Japan to form a centralized, extractive capital like Beijing—which relies on a massive continuous plain and the Grand Canal to suppress and extract from the entire nation. Local

autonomy was much greater, and the court had to allow localities to exercise subjective initiative to maintain rule over the whole country.

Another thing that left a profound impression on me previously was when I looked at the distribution map of the circum-Pacific seismic belt (the Ring of Fire). I was surprised to find that although practically the entire nation of Japan is "unfortunately hit," Kyoto happens to be located precisely in a gap. In a country as prone to natural disasters as Japan, this can be called a haven of peace.

I deduce that once these special natural conditions combined with Japanese mythology, it ultimately formed the ideology that the emperor and the place where he resides (Kyoto) are pure and sacred, while the further away one gets, the more polluted it becomes, and lands outside Japan are realms of filth.

Consequently, the Kinki (近畿) region represented by Kyoto and Osaka was known in Japan as *"Kamigata"* (上方), while the Kanto region was disparagingly referred to as the rustic countryside (田野乡间). This remained true even into the ***early modern*** (近世) Edo period, when Edo had actually become Japan's political center.

The Kanto *Samurai* also harbored this mindset. When Hōjō Yasutoki (北条泰时), the *Shikken* (执权 / Regent) of the Kamakura Shogunate, was compiling the *Goseibai Shikimoku* (《御成败式目》 / Formulary of Adjudications), he expressed in a letter to his brother that this newborn *Buke* legal code might be mocked by the people of Kyoto as the laws of rustic villagers.

However, from another perspective, this arrogance from the *"Kamigata"* also made it difficult for the Japanese court to control the entire nation. The *Kuge* (公卿) would barely leave Kyoto a few times in their entire lives. As for the emperor, excluding situations like the Nanboku-chō period or being exiled by the *Samurai*, it was even more impossible.

Even at the dawn of the Meiji Restoration, when the young Meiji Emperor saw the Pacific Ocean with his own eyes for the first time en route from Kyoto to Tokyo, his companion Kido Takayoshi (木户孝允) was moved to tears, because an emperor had not seen the open sea for several centuries!

Kyoto itself was known as "easy to attack, hard to defend." This is not so much regarding its topography, but rather that the city was overwhelmingly dependent on logistical inputs. Even if an army occupied the city, if the logistics network was severed by the enemy, they would have to evacuate Kyoto. Such events occurred several times during the Nanboku-chō period.

The court lacked both interest in and understanding of places far from Kyoto and Osaka, yet it could not suppress the entire nation relying solely on the *Kinai* (畿内 / capital region). Even if it genuinely wanted to construct a bureaucratic centralized despotic polity like China's, it was geopolitically exceedingly difficult.

Thus, the rise of the *Samurai*, particularly their rise in the Kanto region, was unstoppable. On the one hand, they expanded production and accumulated strength in Kanto; on the other hand, they fortified their military power and political organization during their wars against the Emishi, ultimately growing into the mainstay of Japan's feudal revolution.

However, no matter how many favorable conditions exist, ultimate success depends on human agency. One of the simplest things in the world is finding rationales for events that have already occurred. People will never obtain a precise answer as to how much decisive significance these favorable conditions ultimately possessed.

We can even imagine: if China's ***feudalization*** (封建化) had ultimately been able to proceed normally, how many "factors favorable to China's ***feudalization***" could have been found?

For example, the four favorable conditions for Japan's ***feudalization*** I just identified all refer to the early and middle stages of this process. In the final stage of Japan's ***feudalization***—namely, the transition period from Japan's Sengoku (Warring States) period to the ***early modern society*** (近世社会)—another extremely important favorable factor emerged: the soaring production of precious metals within Japan.

The sharp increase in the circulation of gold and silver stimulated the vitality of the ***commodity economy*** (商品经济), allowing new cities, wealthy merchants (*Gōshō* / 豪商), and autonomous townsmen (*Chōnin* / 町人) to confidently step onto the historical stage. This forged the Oda-Toyotomi (*Shokuhō* / 织丰) regime, which was vastly more powerful than previous *Daimyos*, ultimately creating the socio-economic conditions that led to the complete disintegration of the manors (*Shōen*).

Undoubtedly, the circulation of gold and silver favored Japanese society's rapid transition from the "Sengoku Daimyo ***feudal society*** (封建社会)" of the final 100 years of the ***Chūsei*** (***Middle Ages***) to the "Edo ***early modern society***".

But this by no means implies that every Japanese person, or every Japanese ruler, was able to realize this factor, utilize it, and promote it.

The historical fact is that Toyotomi Hideyoshi (丰臣秀吉), who ultimately completed the great enterprise of pacifying the realm upon the foundation laid by Oda Nobunaga (织田信长), was precisely such a ruler who grasped the pulse of the era and adeptly utilized the power of merchants and commoners.

After securing the realm, he utilized the power derived from urban construction and gold/silver currency to complete various policies represented by the *Taikō Kenchi* (太阁检地 / Taikō's land surveys). These consolidated land possession as well as the master-vassal system and *Chigyō* (知行 / enfeoffment) system mediated by land, rectifying the chaotic state of land property rights nationwide.

It is precisely the combination of the complete maturation of the feudal system and the development of the **urban economy** (城市经济) that constitutes the cornerstone of an ***early modern society*** in the general sense.

Therefore, we must say that the development of Japanese society since the ***Middle Ages*** provided the *possibility* for precious metals to drive social progress, while heroic figures like Toyotomi Hideyoshi turned this into reality through their own struggles.

One point that should not be ignored is that there are many countries and regions worldwide famous for their abundant production of gold and silver, yet none managed to create an enterprise surpassing Japan's.

The fact is, although China was not inherently rich in gold and silver, the volume of silver imported since the Longqing (隆庆) era of the Ming Dynasty was undeniably massive. However, the development of the ***commodity economy*** in the late Ming ultimately failed to propel China into modern civilization.

The Samurai stood at the forefront of the historical torrent of Japan's ***feudalization***, composing immortal feats. Throughout Asia, they can be deemed the "most revolutionary" class; their subjective initiative (主观能动性 / human agency) absolutely cannot be ignored.

3, What Factors in Japanese History Were Unfavorable to Feudalization?

Since the *Samurai* had already grown into the pillar of Japan's military power during the Heian period, the greatest difficulty encountered by Japan's ***feudalization*** (封建化) was actually not on the military level.

If one must point it out, the most dangerous military crisis the Japanese *Samurai* ever faced was rather the Yuan Dynasty's amphibious invasions of Japan. As for the *Kuge* (court nobles) who stood in opposition to the *Buke* (warrior houses) regarding state power *(this opposition refers to the overall historical process, not that they were always opposed at every moment)*, they inherently lacked armed forces sufficient to confront the *Samurai*. This is entirely different from the Chinese court, which could use whips to drive hundreds of thousands of commoners as cannon fodder in war.

In my view, a highly fascinating phenomenon is that many cultural products about *Samurai* I have seen—whether created by the Japanese themselves or by Europe and America—ultimately emphasize *"overcoming oneself"* (战胜自己) more than *"defeating the enemy."*

This historical memory possesses a wondrous accuracy, because the genuine difficulty of Japan's ***feudalization*** lay precisely in the *Samurai*'s need to "overcome themselves"—they had to overcome the inherent conservatism of ***feudalism***, while simultaneously forming their self-awareness and class assertions (阶级主张).

If we consider Europe's ***feudalization*** process, this difference becomes much easier to discern. For the ***barbarians*** (蛮族) entering civilized regions, they lacked any mature political system internally. Their ***productive forces*** (生产力) had developed to the extent that required establishing corresponding ***feudal relations of production*** (封建生产关系). Therefore, they merely needed to militarily defeat the remnants of the empire and occupy the lands the empire once held.

Aside from China, no other ***classical empire*** possessed such a comprehensive **bureaucratic system**. For the ***barbarians***, it is even hard to say there was anything that needed to be destroyed, because once the social conditions for **class substitution** vanished, a general ***classical bureaucratic system*** would naturally wither away. The establishment of the feudal system was an exceedingly natural process.

In Japan, however, the *Samurai* themselves were born and rose to power *under* the political system of the mid-to-late Heian period. They had to seize power from within to attain political dominance; accomplishing such an enterprise was inextricably linked to resolve and ambition.

First, let's look at the initial point: what is the "inherent conservatism of ***feudalism***"? This actually means that if a typical ***feudal society*** (封建社会) is compared to the eras before and after it, it is considerably lacking in the desire to expand, let alone expanding its own systems to other regions.

Let us now observe the situations before and after ***feudal society***. First is the ***early state*** (早期国家), where the slavery system serves as the primary mode of exploitation. Next is the ***classical state*** (古典国家) during the transition from the slavery system to the feudal system. Then is the **feudal state** (封建国家), with the feudal system as its main body. Following that is the ***early modern state*** (近世国家 / absolute state) during the transition from the **feudal system** to ***capitalist society*** (资本主义社会). Finally, there is the typical bourgeois democratic state—i.e., ***modern society*** *(temporarily referred to according to domestic Chinese standards)*.

Among these five stages, the expansiveness of the ***classical states*** and ***early modern states*** adjacent to the ***feudal society*** needs no emphasis whatsoever. The former forged a batch of great empires that are still yearned for by the people of their successors today. The latter initiated the most drastic population migrations and political map transformations in recorded human history, achieved through the Age of Discovery and subsequent colonial activities.

Moreover, this expansion was not only reflected in territory but also in culture and institutions. For example, the Han Dynasty established commanderies and counties (郡县) in conquered regions, deeply influencing the entire ***East Asia*** with Han culture. The first batch of states established in ***Southeast Asia*** almost all modeled themselves after India, to the point that originating from India was a crucial prerequisite for becoming a high-ranking priest or scholar.

Alexander's Eastern Campaigns left behind a vast Hellenistic world (希腊化世界), where Greek culture encountered and influenced Eastern cultures such as Buddhism. The Roman Empire's influence on the Mediterranean world goes without saying; as for the Byzantine Empire, which styled itself as the orthodox successor of Rome, during most of its existence it had long lost control of the Apennine Peninsula, being built entirely upon territories once conquered by Rome.

As for the cultural and institutional expansion of absolute ***early modern states***, it likewise needs no mention; one simply needs to take a casual glance at the regimes currently existing in the New World, and the answer is self-evident.

Moreover, the ***early states*** (早期国家)—which were slavery-based and predated ***classical states***—also harbored an urgent need to launch foreign wars.

This was not only because the source of legitimacy for the rulers of ***early states*** still inherited the traditions of the clan commune period—namely, the ruler needed to demonstrate his leadership and martial prowess through military victories. It was also because, under a mode of exploitation

dominated by the direct exploitation of labor, manpower occupied the position of the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素). Acquiring more slaves was essential for maintaining the state.

We might as well formulate a simple hypothesis: in an ***early state***, there is an inequality in status and wealth among aristocrats, freemen, and slaves. Excluding factors like intermarriage, class mobility, and violent slaughter, the population of the aristocracy obviously grows faster than that of the slaves. This is because the upper classes clearly possess better conditions for raising offspring, whereas it is extremely difficult for the destitute masses to even leave behind descendants *(thinking of China's current demographic situation, I cannot help but sigh deeply)*.

Therefore, in order to maintain the relative balance of domestic class forces and the existing production order, replenishing slaves through trade and war became crucial.

The Shang Dynasty in our country is a highly typical example. The Shang kings frequently had to launch military expeditions against peripheral "uncivilized peoples," plundering populations and using some as sacrificial offerings to consolidate their own power. Middle Eastern ***early states***, such as Assyria, likewise have numerous records of forcibly relocating populations. The military operations of ***early states*** caused their cultures and systems to expand beyond their borders. For example, during its zenith, Egypt perennially advanced up the Nile to attack the Nubia region; subsequently, an ***early state*** deeply influenced culturally by Egypt formed in this area.

The slave trade similarly leads to class differentiation in the slave-exporting regions, eventually propelling them into a ***slavery society***, a phenomenon glaringly obvious in Africa during the Age of Discovery.

As for the typical bourgeois democratic states that emerged later than the ***early modern states*** (近代国家)—whether they are what Lenin called imperialist states, or the modern Western states after the United States dominated the international order—they do not necessarily desire direct control over vast territories and populations. However, their "***capitalist***" demands for opening markets and conducting investments are exceedingly robust.

This is because, among the three ***primary factors of production*** that successively occupied the apex —labor, land, and capital—it seems only capital views *self-expansion* (增殖 / in the political context of China, it is hard to imagine a better term, but it essentially means continuous accumulation and growth) as its lifeblood. Consequently, it possesses a intense drive for perpetual expansion.

Even if ***capitalist states*** harbor no good intentions, they inevitably hope that the systems of other countries—especially those with massive economic potential—are conducive to capital expansion. For instance, when China attempted to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), Western

countries led by the United States were highly concerned about the issue of China's market economy system, hoping China would make certain changes *(from the standpoint of the Chinese common people, these were naturally progressive changes beneficial to the people)*.

In contrast, a typical ***early feudal regime*** lacked such desires for territorial expansion and institutional export.

From our contemporary perspective, the era of ***feudalization*** (封建化) as a whole is already in the past, and we can no longer experience it intuitively. But based on deduction, the explanation I offer is this: the ***early feudal era*** was a period when the basic unit of production shrank to its absolute minimum since the advent of human class differentiation.

There was neither the collective labor of tens of thousands of people from the slavery period, nor the dozens of territory-expanding legions from the ***classical period***, nor the prosperous handicraft and commercial towns of the ***early modern period***—let alone the era following the Industrial Revolution, where it is hard for anyone to isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

The characteristics of the ***early feudal society*** (早期封建社会) are glaringly obvious: a self-sufficient, small-scale ***natural economy*** (自然经济) could form even within a very small scope, and its circulation was extremely limited. Based on this economic model, the administrative power of the ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) was heavily restricted, and state power plunged into a recession.

In fact, there is extremely tangential yet compelling evidence proving that this tendency indeed exists: a large array of religions that remain active in the world today achieved widespread dissemination globally precisely from the early stages of ***feudalization*** (封建化).

This includes Catholicism in Western and Central Europe; Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe; Islam from Senegambia all the way to Java; Hinduism in the subcontinent *(particularly the Bhakti movement / 巴克提运动)*; Dianmi (滇密 / Yunnan Esoteric Buddhism) in the Dali Kingdom and the Pagan Kingdom of Myanmar; Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia *(this description here is not entirely accurate, and I will discuss Tibetan Buddhism again later)*; Daoism and Buddhism in the Chinese interior from the Eastern Han to the Northern and Southern Dynasties; and Japanese Buddhism during Japan's ***Chūsei*** (***Middle Ages***).

Why did world religions rapidly replace ***classical state*** religions and achieve widespread dissemination right when the entire world stepped into the early stages of ***feudalization***?

The most rational explanation is that when secular power began to become absent at the grassroots level of society, religion naturally filled this ecological niche (生态位). These illustrious major religions possessed religious orders (教团), and their clerics were absolute intellectuals within local societies, capable of playing roles in arbitration and mediation. This point is manifested extremely clearly in the tales of *Effendi* (阿凡提 / Nasreddin) popular from China's Xinjiang to Turkey.

World religions brought a certain degree of organization to the fragmented societies of early ***feudalization***. Worship, pilgrimage, and ascetic practices allowed society to maintain a form of circulation that transcended mere economic needs. It constructed an ideology suited for the ***feudal era***, particularly providing the answer to why ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) possessed the legitimate right to rule the lands under their jurisdiction.

In fact, the Islam we speak of today was so incredibly successful during early ***feudalization*** that it ironically became an obstacle hindering Islamic countries from entering ***modern society***. This means the grassroots organization around mosques during early ***feudalization*** was *too* successful, becoming a drag when state power was to be reconstructed in late ***feudalization***.

Another counterexample from China illustrates this point even more vividly: the highly renowned "Disasters of Wu and Zong" (三武一宗灭佛 / the Four Buddhist Persecutions in China). Their time span stretched from the mid-5th century CE to the mid-10th century CE, which precisely coincided with the period when China's **bureaucratic system** was comprehensively restored *(beginning in the Northern and Southern Dynasties and completing in the Song)*.

This counterexample demonstrates that China's despotic rulers recognized the fact that religion competed with state power in grassroots organization. Therefore, once they decided to restore the **bureaucratic system**, they had to destroy the Buddhist monastic orders (僧团). The fact is, these "usurpers of the state" (窃国之贼) achieved their goal. The theories and organizations of Han Chinese Buddhism became increasingly hollow; by the twilight of the Chinese Empire's rule, it had decayed beyond recognition, to the point that throughout the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, right up to today, Tibetan Buddhism has ironically been viewed as "higher Buddhism" in China.

On the other hand, after entering the ***feudal era***, land became the most critical means of production. This spurred the gradual germination of consciousness surrounding land possession. Coupled with the development of new lands, the point-and-line (点线式) rule characteristic of ***classical empires*** and earlier slavery kingdoms passed into history *(this, of course, also refers to frontiers)*.

By the ***feudal era***, the borders between lords became clear and explicit. Once someone attempted to shatter the *fait accompli* with armed force, it would inevitably arouse the vigilance of surrounding

lords. Today we know that wars aimed at annexing territory during the ***feudal era*** heavily emphasized having a *"just cause"* (师出有名 / *Casus Belli*). For example, in the game *Crusader Kings*, without a claim (宣称) derived from inheritance laws, it is exceedingly difficult for both the player and the AI to expand.

Whether the real ***Middle Ages*** was this strict I cannot say for certain, but there is no doubt that back then, challenging the status quo collectively maintained by various lords exacted a colossal cost. The low capacity of the state also meant that lords lacked strong expansionist desires, because even if they nominally acquired new territories, managing them was difficult, and ultimately they would have to entrust the new fiefs to vassals. Whether the vassals would be loyal and whether they could deliver sufficient benefits became one problem; whether new neighboring countries harbored hostile designs became another.

Therefore, sometimes after expanding, ***feudal lords*** found that far from becoming stronger, they had merely invited a host of troubles. Even if a powerful feudal ruler conquered massive territories, he had to face the reality that such territories were administratively unsustainable; he might even have to partition the empire equally among his sons.

Throughout the ***early feudal era***, it was highly normal for inheritance laws to lean toward **partible inheritance** (析产制), because labor based on the small family unit was more efficient. This was also reflected in the early history of the Japanese *Samurai*: the *Myōji* (苗字 / surnames) of many famous *Samurai* families we see today originally derived from the place names of manor territories divided through partible inheritance.

All the facts above demonstrate that for ***early feudal*** rulers, compared to their ruler counterparts before and after them, the costs of expansion were colossal, while the benefits were minimal and fraught with uncertainty. Under self-sufficient social conditions, exporting institutions externally appeared even more meaningless.

The drastic territorial expansions we see today during the early-to-mid ***feudalization*** period—which ultimately established feudal systems in conquered territories—were often conducted as ***feudal holy wars*** (封建圣战) under the aegis of religion. Examples include the Eastern Crusades (东征) of the German Teutonic Order, and the *Jihad* (吉哈德) launched by frontier Muslim regimes *(frontier relative to those far from Baghdad)*.

Similarly, in the Iberian region—where the power balance between regimes frequently reversed—the religious fervor of both Catholicism and Islam was exceedingly high, and the two sides waged holy wars against each other countless times. Although the Crusades aimed at the Holy Land

ultimately failed, they did once establish regimes featuring Western European feudal systems on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

For a secular feudal ruler unable to effectively harness religious fanaticism *(for instance, when neighboring rulers share the same faith)*, his need to protect his borders and secure the peace of his people (保境安民) indeed often outweighed the desire to expand territory (开疆拓土).

From the standpoint of subordinate rulers, the vassals (封臣) could not possibly hope for their lord to constantly win battles, because the stronger their lord or his family became, the relatively weaker the vassals' power would be. Even with the existence of feudal contracts, maintaining a relative balance of power was always the first imperative to ensure the security of one's own fief.

In actual warfare, the army was no longer a state-owned "official army" (官军) like those in the past or future, but rather a coalition army composed of the individual troops of many lords. If a lord wanted to fully unleash the military potential within his domain, he could not solely conscript troops from his direct demesne (直辖领地); he similarly needed to summon his vassals to participate in the war.

Since ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) of all sizes regarded their fiefs as their hereditary foundations, it was perfectly normal to adopt a passive attitude of preserving one's own strength in a war where it was difficult to profit even in victory. Conversely, for any defensive war where defeat would result in the loss of their own territory, there was probably no lord who would not go all out.

Whether in Japan or Europe, when people mention the ***Middle Ages***, the first thing that usually comes to mind is the countless castles and fortresses dotting the land. In a society that was literally "heavily fortified" (壁垒森严), launching an offensive required the utmost caution, and returning without success was entirely commonplace.

Finally, one must absolutely not forget the actual distribution of the ruling class—that is, the ***feudal lords***—under the specific economic conditions of a ***feudal society***. *(From here on, I have decided to make a distinction to overcome the influence of the domestic Chinese context: I will only refer to the landowners who rely on rent-tax as their primary mode of exploitation under our country's* ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** *as "landlords" /* 地主*, and refer to all others universally as* ***"feudal lords"*** */* 封建领主*).*

Compared to the preceding slavery-based aristocracy and the subsequent bourgeoisie (资产阶级), ***feudal lords*** exhibited a distinct characteristic of dispersion in their geographical distribution. This

is because the former [***feudal lords***] had to reside in their fiefs, or at least periodically return there for a time, to maintain control over the land and its appendages (including people), whereas the latter [ancient nobles and modern bourgeoisie] were highly concentrated in city-states and towns.

Today, when people mention ancient Egypt, ancient Western Asia, and the Indus Valley civilization, the first thing that comes to mind is a series of ancient cities that remain famous even today. China was the same: the aristocrats of the Shang and Zhou dynasties ruled the state from within cities, and it was not until the Warring States period that the distinction between *Guoren* (国人 / urban dwellers) and *Yeren* (野人 / rural dwellers) completely disappeared.

As for the bourgeoisie, there is even less need to elaborate. The commercial and industrial cities that arose in the ***Late Middle Ages***, as hubs concentrating fully-equipped populations (especially high-quality human capital), wealth, materials, and information, were clearly the stage for the rising bourgeoisie to unleash their capabilities.

The aggregation of the ruling class forced them to interact more frequently, thereby making it easier to generate consensus and form collective decisions. Conversely, once the ruling class was distributed too broadly, consensus and collective decision-making were not easily generated. The emergence of localism (地方主义) was fundamentally inevitable, making it difficult to form the perspective of *"we have common class interests."*

Considering the above reasons comprehensively, the "inherent conservatism of ***feudalism***" is not difficult to understand. As the population grew, the economy developed, towns boomed, and a massive number of nobles with no inheritance rights or very low inheritance priority emerged—and most importantly, as the feudal system consolidated and the social order restructured—this conservatism gradually disappeared.

This conservatism was not very likely to cause disastrous consequences in ***feudalization*** (封建化) regions that had experienced the Great Migrations (民族大迁徙). After all, if a feudal regime was surrounded by a forest of other feudal regimes, even if the borders changed, *"the meat rots but stays in the pot"* (肉烂了还在锅里 / *meaning the resources and spoils merely circulated internally without altering the overall feudal nature*); the social system itself would not experience a reversal.

For regimes on the periphery of feudal regions, even if they could not actively expand into un*feudalized* areas, it was sufficient as long as they could defend their territories against more backward ***barbarians***.

It is very easy to observe that Europe was situated in exactly such an advantageous position. It is a massive peninsula extending from the western tip of the Eurasian continent; overall, it is vulnerable to attack only from one direction: the east.

This meant that the intensity of the ***barbarian*** impact on an already *feudalized* Europe—particularly the impact of an un*feudalized* people with a special mode of production, namely nomadic peoples (游牧民族)—was vastly smaller compared to ***East Asia*** and ***the Middle East***.

Even at the zenith of their power, the threat posed by the Nordic Vikings to the European continent bore absolutely no comparison to the nomadic empires of the Asian steppes that routinely swept across thousands of kilometers. The fact is, before the Vikings could inflict systemic destruction on the overall ***feudalization*** achievements of the European continent, they themselves rapidly *feudalized*.

However, in ***East Asia***, because of the formidable strength of China's remnant **bureaucratic system**, the inherent conservatism and sluggishness of the ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) were sufficient to grant the bureaucratic system the breathing room necessary to prepare its reactionary counterattacks.

When we look back at history, we see so many tragedies that occurred on this continent: the military commanders of the Southern Dynasties *(represented typically by the generals commanding personal retinues / Buqu in Eastern Wu, and the refugee commanders / Liumin Shuai leading armed displaced persons in the Eastern Jin)* were suspected, restricted, suppressed, and divided by the court. They failed to overpower the monarchs residing in Jiangzuo as guests, and never formed a "class interests coalition" (阶级利益共同体). Once the Liu clan achieved absolute dominance through military brilliance, they were desperate to restore the monarch-subject order, deeply terrified that posterity might follow in their own footsteps.

The Eastern Wei of the Northern Dynasties had twice the population of the Western Wei, yet failed to rapidly translate this into a military advantage, allowing the Guanzhong (关西) region to complete the initial restructuring of its **bureaucratic system**. The actual ruler, the Gao clan (高氏), lacked a stance of ***feudalization***. Various conspiracies ran rampant within the state; by the time the Gao clan gave up being Shoguns (幕府将军) and reluctantly sat upon the supreme throne, the political situation remained turbulent, ultimately leading to their destruction by the Northern Zhou.

As for the frontier warlords (*Fanzhen* / 藩镇) that arose in the mid-Tang Dynasty, there is even less need to mention them. They could not even govern their own fiefs competently, and were perfectly content as long as the court's hands could not reach them for a single day. Pushing the feudal system nationwide was something they did not even dare to imagine.

The above basically concern the core regions of China. If we cast our gaze to the frontiers, we will find that similar situations existed there as well. The most typical examples are the Nanzhao (南诏) and Dali (大理) regimes established in Yunnan Province *(the brief transitional regimes in between can be ignored)*.

Nanzhao was a ***classical empire*** modeled after the Tang Dynasty; it was not only capable of fighting but also highly bellicose, even eventually being dragged down by wars. The Dali Kingdom that arose subsequently was a regime with a highly advanced ***degree of feudalization***, but this regime frequently plunged into civil wars and political turmoil. Let alone launching foreign wars, even its diplomacy became highly strained; it was only when Dali's history was half over that it established diplomatic ties with the Song Dynasty.

These feudal regimes, or regimes with a high ***degree of feudalization***, that once appeared on the continent—whether due to lack of capability, lack of will, or a combination of both—always gave off a sensation of "sitting still" (静坐) during their existence. They just waited and waited, until they were finally annihilated by enemies they could not overcome.

Japanese *Samurai* similarly harbored this tendency. Taira no Masakado (平将门), despite raising an army and declaring himself the "New Emperor" (新皇) in rebellion against the court, still hoped the court would acknowledge the reality of his occupation of the Eight Provinces of Kanto. His mindset was simply to repel the official army if the court attacked.

After Minamoto no Yoritomo (源赖朝) opened the Shogunate in Kamakura, many direct vassals (*Gokenin* / 御家人) harbored a Togoku-centric (东国本位 / Eastern Japan-centric) ideology, viewing the Shogunate merely as an independent kingdom in Eastern Japan.

Fortunately, the Japanese court did not possess the capability to ultimately defeat and disintegrate the ***feudal lords*** like the Chinese court did. The Northern Fujiwara (奥州藤原氏) once built Hiraizumi into the nation's second-largest city, second only to Kyoto, yet their descendants could not even manage to be good "watchdogs of their households" (守户之犬).

If Japan's **bureaucratic system** had been just a little stronger, if the court had truly possessed an armed force, and if the rulers had had half the cunning and cruelty of their Chinese counterparts—using deceit and hypocrisy to divide and disintegrate the *Samurai* to buy time—how many more variables would have been added to Japanese history?

In the process of expanding and penetrating their ruling power nationwide, outstanding statesmen such as Minamoto no Yoritomo, Hōjō Masako (北条政子), Hōjō Yoshitoki (北条义时), Hōjō Yasutoki (北条泰时), and Ōe no Hiromoto (大江广元) rendered monumental contributions. In particular, the Shogunate's rapid and decisive handling of the Jōkyū War (承久之乱) is especially praiseworthy.

Stressing the word "speed" in all matters, always acting ahead of others, and never giving potential waverers the chance to sit on the fence or act capriciously—this was indeed an outstanding quality of the *Samurai* when facing sudden emergencies, exactly like the stories narrated in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (《今昔物语集》 / Anthology of Tales from the Past).

By the time of the Mongol invasions of Japan (元日战争), the Shogunate openly acted on behalf of Japan in international diplomatic arenas. Faced with the unprecedented threat of a homeland invasion, the Shogunate expanded the scope of the *Buke*'s authority (武家权能).

In the face of a "national catastrophe" (天下大难), the Shogunate acquired greater legitimate cause (大义名分) from the court: anyone capable of fighting, regardless of whether they had a master-vassal relationship with the Lord of Kamakura (镰仓殿), could be mobilized by the Shogunate, and the Shogunate's scope for levying military rations was also expanded.

A massive number of *Gokenin* from the East went to Kyushu to participate in the defense and settled there, inevitably bringing Kanto consciousness and customs to the West. And because the threat of Mongol invasion might not disappear immediately, there was no explicit endpoint to the continuation of the state of war. In the joint enterprise of coping with the "Mongol Pirates" (元寇 / *Genkō*), the distinction between *Gokenin* and non-*Gokenin* also blurred.

Although this war imposed a massive burden on the Shogunate and accelerated its demise, the power of the *Buke* regime never regressed again. It was precisely on the foundation of the Shogunate expanding its authority nationwide and penetrating every domain that the *Samurai* could finally realize that **they themselves were the rulers of the state, and by no means merely acting as security guards defending the interests of the court and the aristocrats.**

This points to the second difficulty: the *Samurai* needed to realize that their class was the master of the entire state, rather than forever remaining the servants of the emperor and the aristocrats.

This problem was likewise unique to ***East Asia***, because in regions where ***barbarians*** who had *Entered the Pass* (***Ru Guan*** / 入关) spearheaded ***feudalization***, there were absolutely no ideological difficulties to overcome. The ***barbarians*** inherently arrived with the identity of victors; this conquerors' spirit made them intensely certain that they themselves were the rulers of the state, and that Heaven willed them to govern the conquered lands.

Japanese *Samurai* lacked this identity. They stepped onto the historical stage as the mercenaries of the rulers. Thus, when facing the emperor and the *Kuge*, it was extremely normal for them to consciously feel inferior.

Moreover, from a Chinese perspective, it is very easy to point out that this was not merely a problem existing in ideology, but a very realistic political problem. Since ancient times, if one were to ask what technique the Chinese are most adept at, "political manipulation and persecution" (整人) would undoubtedly rank first. They may not have figured out much else, but when it comes to handling the ruled, their skills have reached absolute perfection (炉火纯青), and this ideology also indirectly affected regions peripheral to China.

In our country, there is an old saying: *"The gun shoots the bird that pokes its head out"* (枪打出头鸟). One can fully imagine that Japanese *Samurai* once faced the exact same predicament. Even if individuals realized they should act as the rulers of the state, rashly raising an army remained a highly dangerous endeavor. This was because it was difficult to judge the stance of surrounding *Samurai*. While it was true that *Samurai* could forge alliances, for the others, accepting the court's decree to hunt down the rebel, striking down the "bird that poked its head out," and partitioning his territory was also a viable option—and one that appeared vastly less risky.

One must not forget that the emperor and the court held the *"legitimate cause"* (大义名分) in their hands. Ever since the Rebellion of Taira no Masakado, *Samurai* hunting down *Samurai* by the decree of the court was the historical norm.

The establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate was a momentous leap forward. The *Samurai* now possessed state apparatuses belonging to themselves; they could gather together, deliberate, form a consensus, and execute decisions. Therefore, when Retired Emperor Go-Toba (后鸟羽天皇) attempted to raise an army to annihilate the Shogunate (during the Jōkyū War), the Kanto *Samurai* realized for the first time that the importance of defending the collective interests of the *Samurai* class could supersede the pursuit of the interests of a single family or surname.

By the time Hōjō Yasutoki promulgated and implemented the *Jōei Shikimoku* (《贞永式目》 / The Jōei Formulary, also known as *Goseibai Shikimoku*), the *Samurai* had already acquired clear self-awareness and self-expression, desiring to establish an order dominated by the *Buke*.

The most commendable point is that the *Jōei Shikimoku* overcame the legal tradition inherited from China. It repudiated the notion that laws determining the order of the realm were obtained through sages *"handing down constitutions and setting models"* (垂宪作则). Instead, it recognized that laws should reflect the common interest demands of the ruling class, taking a historic step forward.

I believe the *Shikimoku* can be viewed as the definitive marker of Japan parting ways with China. From then on, the two countries never again approached one another in terms of social nature. China slid continuously down the path of bureaucratization, while Japan left all other Asian countries in the dust.

Even so, from the subjugation of the Taira clan right up until the demise of the Kamakura Shogunate, the Shogunate only confiscated the manor territories of hostile factions, never directing its spearhead at the *Kuge* themselves. The *Shōen-Kōryō* system (庄园公领制) of the late Heian period continued to persist in Japan.

When reading, I noticed that Japanese scholars also seemed astonished by this phenomenon: why, even more than a century into the ***Chūsei*** (***Middle Ages***), were annual tributes (*Nengu* / 年贡) from all over the country still being sent to Kyoto exactly as before? The authors could only sigh and deduce that people had perhaps become so accustomed to doing so that they felt it *"ought to be this way!"*

However, under such circumstances, although the *Samurai* acting as *Jitō* (地头 / estate stewards) did indeed possess partial land property rights by exercising police power, taxation power, and local management rights, the most crucial *absolute land ownership* still remained in the hands of the aristocratic manor lords. This meant a massive gap still existed between the *Samurai* and the ***feudal lords*** of Europe.

If we observe the post of *Shugo* (守护 / military governors) during the Kamakura period, it is not difficult to discover that this post was far from hereditary; rather, it corresponded to the *Kokushi* (provincial governors) under the *Ritsuryō* system. This also demonstrates that ***feudalization*** during the Kamakura period was still highly incomplete.

From the late Kamakura to the early Muromachi period, the *Jitō* expanded their dominating power through arbitration in the forms of *Jitō-uke* (地头请 / stewardship contracts) or *Shitaji chūbun* (下

地中分 / physical division of land). The latter, in particular, allowed the *Jitō* to begin genuinely transforming into ***feudal lords***.

Even more drastic changes occurred during the chaos of the Nanboku-chō (Northern and Southern Courts) period. Before this, it was one thing if *Samurai* quietly encroached upon aristocratic manors; but if they brazenly confronted the court, they would make themselves public enemies.

However, once Emperor Go-Daigo fled to Yoshino, one country shockingly possessed two emperors and two courts. People's awe and reverence for the *Kuge* instantaneously plummeted. Moreover, no matter which side one chose to attack, there was always an imperial edict from the *other* side providing a *"legitimate cause."* Thus, brazenly seizing the land of hostile aristocrats or *Samurai* no longer carried any psychological burden.

Japanese scholars are also forced to admit that the Nanboku-chō chaos lasted so long because the *Samurai* participating nationwide did not care in the slightest which emperor was the orthodox one. They prioritized considering which side they could join to obtain practical benefits.

The reason the Northern Court was ultimately able to achieve victory was probably still because the Muromachi Shogunate secured and expanded the territories of the *Samurai*—particularly massively strengthening the authority of the *Shugo*—leading *Samurai* everywhere to conclude that defecting to the Northern Court was the secure choice to preserve their existing territories!

When the two courts were unified, the land ownership of the *Samurai* expanded nationwide, the proportion of monistic control (一元化支配) over land increased, and the manors (*Shōen*) grew feeble. From this perspective, although the *Taiheiki* (《太平记》 / *Chronicle of Great Peace*) contains very few days of actual peace, the story it tells is indeed the path leading to the "Great Peace of the Realm."

Under precisely these conditions, the *Samurai* began to broadly realize that, as the ruling class of the state, it was perfectly justifiable for them to acquire power, and no mere *"legitimate cause"* (名分) could stop them.

Starting from the mid-Muromachi period, the phenomenon of *Gekokujō* (下克上 / the lower overcoming the upper) became extremely prevalent. We cannot view this as a question of loyalty or disloyalty, but must straightforwardly point out that **this was a widespread process in which the direct possessors of the means of production overthrew the indirect possessors through violent activities to acquire power and position. It was not a rebellion; it was a revolution.**

Accompanied by drastic social movements like *Gekokujō* and *Ikki* (一揆 / peasant and religious uprisings), the *Shōen-Kōryō* system continued to disintegrate. The Sengoku *Daimyos* (战国大名)—who could implement monistic control over their domains, possessed retainer bands (家臣团) with stringent master-vassal relationships, and resided in castles—stepped onto the historical stage.

Only at this moment could the *Daimyos* finally be said to be ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) identical to their European counterparts. *(Of course, people certainly cannot accurately demarcate the exact year they became identical and the year before which they were different. After all, Japanese society changed gradually in history, just as Europe could not possibly have remained static during the four to five centuries of the* ***High and Late Middle Ages****. In fact, I believe that when the Shugo domain system /* 守护领国制 *was basically established in the mid-Muromachi period, Japan's feudal system could be considered formed. Because during this period, the aristocrats' control over the manors had virtually vanished, and the Samurai completely controlled local regimes and land).*

Japan had finally entered a typical ***feudal society***; however, from the perspective of socioeconomic development, it had already reached the level of **late feudalism**. This is precisely why, under the banner of the far-sightedness and martial prowess of the three *"Tenkabito"* (天下人 / Unifiers of the Realm), Japan was able to complete the transition from a ***feudal society*** to an ***early modern society*** with such astonishing speed within a single century.

Here, the only point requiring people's special attention is this: before the West ended its ***feudalization*** process, entered ***early modern society***, and experienced the explosive development of science and technology, the major civilized regions of the Eurasian continent—regardless of what systems they adopted—could not open up a decisive gap in the developmental level of their ***productive forces*** (生产力).

It is akin to Song Dynasty China, which was already entirely in a ***restoration-bureaucratic society***, while Western Europe was simultaneously in the ***High Middle Ages***. In reality, the level of ***productive forces*** in the Song Dynasty was completely sufficient to support China adopting the exact same social morphology as Western Europe during the ***High Middle Ages***, only this possibility was strangled by political factors.

When observing Japan, it is not difficult to discover that Japan's ***Chūsei*** (***Middle Ages***) was, after all, different from Europe's. In Western Europe, the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期)—the period when the feudal system was most mature and typical—was simultaneously the historical stage when the ***manorial economy*** (庄园经济) was most prosperous.

But in Japan, the formation of the ***High Middle Ages*** society entirely dominated by ***feudal lords*** of all ranks proceeded simultaneously with the *decline* of the manorial system. This was because it was precisely the disintegration of Japan's manorial system that allowed the *Daimyos* to achieve monistic control over their territories.

From the perspective of economic development, the destabilization of Japan's manorial system occurred not much later than in Western Europe. The factors that would ultimately extinguish the manorial system at the economic level—the recovery of the ***commodity economy***, the popularization of currency, the development of handicrafts, and the reclamation of new lands—were also identical.

This distinction between Japan and Western Europe still lay in their earlier political development. Japanese *Samurai*, after all, were not conquerors possessing a natural right to rule Japan. It took time for them to become an outstanding feudal ruling class in both strength and consciousness. In the process where the *Samurai*—acting as ***feudal lords***—completely expelled the aristocrats (who originally held the ownership of the manors) from the stage of state politics, massive wars and widespread peasant uprisings inevitably accompanied them.

From the perspective of social restructuring in the ***Middle Ages***, the historical process of Japan achieving this goal was clearly much more intense. Looking back from today's perspective, the most gratifying thing for the Japanese should be that although the wars of the Sengoku period were tragically brutal, their significance was indeed extraordinary. The rapid social transformations allowed Japan to massively close the gap with the historical trajectory of Western Europe, even though the complete disappearance of this gap had to wait until after World War II.

The history of the Edo period is something I dislike reading. This is because, as a Chinese person, if we can say that China at least skirted the edges of the ***feudal era***, then when it comes to the ***early modern*** (近世) period in Japan, I find many things utterly incomprehensible.

My country never experienced such a stage, and even today, it lacks a genuine civil society (市民社会). The high development of the economy, the prosperity of *Chōnin* (町人 / townsman) culture, the germination of civil rights ideologies (民权思想), and calm, organized, disciplined uprisings go without saying.

What impressed me most was one author who converted the income of Japanese peasants in the late Edo period using the price of rice as a baseline. I discovered that the income of Japanese peasants at that time might have been even higher than that of present-day peasants in Henan province *(of course, we all understand that it is ultimately unreasonable to convert and compare incomes from an industrial society and an agricultural society based solely on the price of rice)*.

What they did during their leisure time can perhaps serve as tangential proof. Even now, many peasants in China still need to take up odd jobs to make money during the agricultural off-season. In contrast, in that era, public activities among the Japanese populace were ridiculously abundant. Traveling far from home was highly common, and major events like the relocation of the Ise Grand Shrine (*Shikinen Sengū* / 伊勢神宮迁宫) could even attract commoners from all over the country. If it weren't for the fact that many commoners had both money and leisure time, how could such activities possibly be sustained?

I can certainly read about these things in books, but I simply cannot acquire any intuitive feeling for them; I even have to read many concepts several times before I can understand them. Therefore, every time I see the achievements Japan made during the Edo period, I feel a deep sense of sorrow.

Fortunately, at least one country—Japan—was able to break through the arduous obstacles and move toward **early modernization and modernization** (近现代化). At the very least, it wasn't a total wipeout for all of Asia (总归不是全亚洲都剃了光头). It proves, at minimum, that yellow-skinned people are capable of building and adapting to modern life, which in turn makes me feel happy for their success.

Thus, my first round of rough investigation into Japanese history has concluded. I can now generally grasp Japan's historical trajectory.

What satisfies me the most is clearly discovering that Japan's history can be fitted into the framework originally discovered regarding China, even if the two countries ultimately did not head in the same direction. Once the validity of this framework is increasingly confirmed through continuous testing, it will become a powerful research tool.

Even if, due to wildly divergent historical developmental paths, different countries only experience a portion of the entire sequence, we can still use the framework to deduce where a country is situated during a specific period. More importantly, we can provide a rational and universal explanation for its subsequent development. This would be an unprecedented achievement (前无古人的成就).

While reading, I continuously communicated with H. In fact, H consumes far more Japanese cultural products than I do. I am an utterly boring person with virtually no hobbies to speak of; I have never watched any anime or series, nor do I have any interest in Japanese pop culture. H is different; he consumes his fair share of anime and outrageous light novels.

H agreed with my views on Japanese history and emphasized that its progressiveness is precisely the reason why Japanese culture is welcomed worldwide, especially in Western European and American countries.

Take the *Samurai* and the *Katana* for example. In truth, we were previously unaware of the *Samurai*'s contributions and the historical significance of the feudal revolution, yet we naturally harbored an affinity for such cultural imagery, finding it "cool."

H's assessment is that even if a person does not understand many profound principles, they will still be naturally attracted to things that possess progressive significance and historical contributions.

Perhaps humanity is inherently a species that pursues freedom and progress; no matter how arduous the environment one is born into, such a magnificent nature can never be completely obliterated.

Chapter 5: Regarding the Yunnan Region

I decided to add this section on a whim. The reason is that yesterday, I was struck by a sudden inspiration while staring at a map of Yunnan Province for a long time, and I suddenly understood a problem that had previously baffled me: namely, the actual historical truth behind Duan Siping (段思平) establishing the Dali Kingdom (大理国).

Our country's official explanation is that Duan Siping was a revolutionary hero who led a slave uprising to overthrow the Dayining (大义宁) regime. After establishing the Dali Kingdom, he abolished the **slavery system** (奴隶制), promoted a feudal land ownership system nationwide, and established a ***feudal system*** (封建制度) in the Dali Kingdom.

This narrative is obviously a form of Soviet Bolshevik-style communist theology—that is, the oppressed class, led by a great leader, defeats the old exploiting class through an uprising and propels society into the next developmental stage.

Through observing human history today, we find that such idealized scenarios have almost never existed. Leaving aside the fact that **class substitution** (阶级更替) is not accomplished through uprisings, there inherently exists a prolonged transition between two typical class societies—for instance, the ***classical states*** (古典国家) and the ***early modern states*** (近世国家). How could a society possibly transform from a typical class society of the previous stage to that of the next stage within a mere two or three generations?

Not to mention, the legendary tale Chinese scholars wove around Duan Siping contains another glaring loophole: this story presumes that the Yunnan region prior to Dali still belonged to a ***slavery society*** (奴隶制社会). This is highly problematic. On the other hand, we clearly know that Nanzhao (南诏) also highly mimicked the Tang Dynasty institutionally, implementing the Equal-field system (均田制), the *Fubing* militia system (府兵制), and the Six *Cao* (六曹) which resembled the Tang Dynasty's Six Ministries. If Nanzhao was a ***slavery society***, then what about the Tang Dynasty? This is an obvious contradiction.

Current literature indicates that Nanzhao certainly contained slavery elements, because it was essentially a ***classical state*** just like the Qin and Han empires, but ***feudal relations of production*** were gradually gaining dominance.

Based on this perspective, and connecting it to the fact that Duan Siping's primary allies when he raised his army to overthrow Dayining were the so-called 37 Tribes of Wuman (乌蛮 37 部) from Eastern Yunnan, I believe there is only one truth to the historical case of Duan Siping establishing Dali: **This was yet another typical event of peripheral empire *barbarians* (蛮族) *Entering the Pass* (*Ru Guan* / 入关) to complete *feudalization* (封建化).**

The reason such an obvious answer is so rarely noticed is that Chinese people always observe Yunnan through a specialized perspective looking outward from ***the Central Plains***.

When Emperor Wu of Han initially conquered this land for China, the Han army indeed arrived from the northeast. The Liangshan (凉山) region directly north of Yunnan was not merely difficult to traverse in ancient times; even today, it is "notorious," and it would be no exaggeration to call it the most backward region in all of China.

Therefore, the Han Dynasty's preferred **Route of the Southwestern Barbarians** (西南夷道) leading to Yunnan was the trajectory of Yibin - Zhaotong - Xuanwei - Qujing - Kunming - Chuxiong - Dali. The event known as "Zhuang Qiao entering Dian" (庄蹻入滇) that occurred earlier in the Warring States period likely also refers to the Chu people reaching Kunming via this way.

Of course, during the Han Dynasty, there indeed existed a **Western Barbarian Route** to the west of the aforementioned path—starting from Chengdu, turning southwest to Ya'an, then piercing through the Liangshan region into Yunnan, and turning west to Dali.

However, the biggest problem with this route was the lack of decent *Bazi* (坝子 / intermontane basins or local plains) along the way; one merely shuttled through towering mountains and steep ridges. This route might have been viable for merchants engaged in the Tea Horse Trade, but it was unfeasible for the Chinese Empire seeking to maintain it politically.

If the empire could not utilize small plains midway along the route to establish commandery and county administrative units to achieve **point-and-line rule** (点线状的统治), then a route where only the two ends existed while hundreds of kilometers in the middle were impossible to defend lacked political significance.

This is precisely why the Han Dynasty established the Yizhou Commandery (益州郡) in the Yunnan region, with its administrative seat located in Dianchi County (滇池县). This was simply because the Dianchi area was the first *Bazi* of respectable scale and agricultural conditions that the Han

people discovered after entering Yunnan. Coupled with the fact that the earlier ancestors of the Dian Kingdom had already undertaken certain development, it was highly suitable to serve as the political center of this region.

However, the power of the Chinese Empire did not linger in Yunnan for long. The empire's sparse point-and-line control in the Southwest could not halt the grand wave of ethnic migrations.

As the ***Chinese classical empire*** collapsed, it was not only the Han ethnicity that moved south under pressure from northern ethnic minorities, but also the Di-Qiang ethnic groups (氐羌系民族) to the northwest of the Han. The migration route of the Di-Qiang ethnic groups moved south precisely along the Western Sichuan Corridor (川西走廊) on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

What is even more noteworthy is that these migrating ethnic groups were not deficient in technological levels. Some of their imprints can be found in the later Nanzhao. A typical example is that Nanzhao possessed a formidable number of cavalry, particularly cataphracts (具装骑兵 / heavy armored cavalry); this was highly likely the legacy of conquerors from the Northwest.

When these Di-Qiang ethnic groups from the west swooped down from the plateau, the first relatively large *Bazi* they saw was the plain near Lake Erhai (洱海). Therefore, they first developed with this location as their center.

Thus, we discover a highly fascinating phenomenon: from Nanzhao (南诏) to the Dali Kingdom (大理国), its capital was consistently located in the city of Yangjumie (羊苴咩城 / modern Dali).

So, how did the people of Nanzhao and Dali view the Kunming region? In fact, the urban history of Kunming can trace its earliest origins to the late 8th century during the Nanzhao period, when it was built as the "Tuodong City" (拓东城 / City of Expanding the East). From this name, it is not difficult to discern the perspective adopted by the Nanzhao people: they viewed the Kunming region as their own *"Vladivostok"* (符拉迪沃斯托克 / which literally means "Ruler of the East" or "Conquer the East").

This reveals an issue that has long been easily obscured by the Sino-centric worldview: during the five centuries from the mid-8th century to the mid-13th century, in this vast area situated among the Tibetan Plateau, the Chinese interior, and the Indochinese Peninsula, the ruling center and "civilizational highland" was actually Dali, biased toward the northwest. The further east and south one went, the more backward it became.

This was because the peripheral mountainous regions were simply too vast and insurmountable, acting like a thick, heavy barrier that blocked out the influence from the distant Chengdu Plain, the middle and lower reaches of the Pearl River, and the Red River Delta.

It is difficult for people today to imagine the status the city of Dali held back then within this southwestern empire. If we look at its geographical location, it is not hard to see that Dali is alarmingly close to the Tibetan Plateau. Historically, the Tubo Dynasty (吐蕃王朝 / Tibetan Empire) was indeed an exceedingly powerful military regime and exerted colossal pressure on Nanzhao.

Yet, the King of Nanzhao would rather stoop to accept investiture from the Tubo *Tsenpo* (赞普) to become a vassal state *(becoming Tubo's 'King of the East Facing the Sun' /* 日东王*)*, than move his capital out of this dangerous location to Kunming, which was obviously vastly safer.

During the Dali Kingdom period, the primary city in the Dianchi (昆明) region was Shanchan Prefecture (善阐府). Because its conditions were inherently superior, it practically enjoyed the status of an auxiliary capital. However, the monarchs of Dali rarely visited; when they did, they came carrying the political mission of pacifying the various eastern tribes.

It was not until the Mongol army swept south along the very Western Sichuan Corridor (川西走廊) that the Di-Qiang ethnic groups had traversed, and breached Dali, that the final monarch of the Dali Kingdom reluctantly fled to Shanchan Prefecture to mount a final, brief resistance.

Through this sorting of historical facts, it becomes easy to see: since the Tuodong City in Kunming during the Nanzhao period was the empire's stronghold for controlling the east, weren't the so-called "Thirty-Seven Tribes of Wuman from Eastern Yunnan" (滇东三十余部乌蛮) mobilized by Duan Siping exactly those **peripheral barbarians** (边疆蛮族) growing restless during the late stages of a ***classical empire***?

Therefore, in all likelihood, the historical truth is this: utilizing the situation of political chaos and frequent uprisings in the Dali region since the demise of the Nanzhao Empire, Duan Siping united the various ***barbarian*** tribes on the eastern frontier of the Nanzhao Empire (east of Kunming)—whose socioeconomic conditions had (partially) developed to the point of generating a demand for ***feudalization***—and launched a decisive ***Ru Guan*** (***Entering the Pass*** / 入关) military campaign from east to west.

Relying on his family lineage, personal charisma, and the prestige brought by leading a victorious war, Duan Siping immediately recognized **feudal land ownership** and bestowed fiefs upon the

meritorious vassals (诸侯). Consequently, he rapidly established a set of feudal master-vassal relationships within the Dali Kingdom. This undoubtedly manifested his outstanding political acumen.

However, although the Duan clan seized power, he ultimately entered Dali back then merely as the "hegemon of the vassals" (诸侯盟主). He probably struggled to secure a massive advantage in his direct demesne (直属领地). This is exactly the reason why the monarchical power of the Dali Kingdom appeared relatively weak throughout its 300-year history.

Following its establishment, the Dali regime exhibited numerous highly ***feudalized*** characteristics that correspond remarkably well to Japan, which shared the same Buddhist faith. Aside from the rulers frequently abdicating early in favor of designated heirs to become monks themselves, the most famous characteristic was the dual-ruling system (二元统治) between the state monarch (the Duan clan) and the state chancellor (the Gao clan), which began in the mid-period.

The Gao clan's ancestor, Gao Fang (高方), was also a meritorious vassal who followed Duan Siping to *Enter the Pass*. The Gao family's trajectory of expanding from a "general *Gokenin*" (一般御家人 / direct vassal) into a "Shogun" (幕府将军) was strikingly similar to that of the Japanese *Samurai*; both continuously expanded their hereditary fiefs by virtue of their meritorious service in suppressing rebellions and "diligently serving and protecting the king" (勤王保驾).

By the end of the 11th century, the Gao clan's fiefs extended from the *"Kinai"* (近畿 / the Dali region centered around Lake Erhai), through *"Nōbi"* (浓尾 / the modern Chuxiong region, then called Weichu Prefecture), all the way to the *"Kanto"* (关东 / the entire Shanchan Prefecture centered around Dianchi). They became the absolute most powerful ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) in all of Dali.

It even reached the point where the Duan monarch was deposed, and Gao Shengtai (高升泰) declared himself emperor. However, Gao Shengtai seemingly realized that maintaining the basic hierarchical order under a ***feudal system*** was inherently beneficial for a massive lord like himself, and that dual politics would not practically harm the Gao clan's interests. Thus, he admonished his descendants to return the throne to the Duan clan after his death, and never to commit such acts of usurpation again.

Judging from the actual work undertaken by the Gao clan, they indeed shouldered the primary military obligations, exactly like a Shogun. *(In other words, they had no choice but to shoulder*

*them; after all, when **barbarian** rebellions spread, their own fiefs would be the first to suffer).* When the frontier tribes of Eastern Yunnan raised armies against the court once more, it was the Chancellor Gao clan who led troops into battle against them.

Naturally, the Gao regime was certainly not as mature as Japan's *Samurai* Shogunate. *(Nor could it possibly be identical to a Shogunate, because the Dali Kingdom simply lacked a Kuge class corresponding to the Buke as in Japan; the King of Dali, the Duan clan, was fundamentally a **feudal lord** himself).* The primary political news throughout the entire latter half of the Dali Kingdom was the endless civil wars within the Gao clan itself.

However, as potentially the first regime in all of Asia to achieve ***feudalization*** (封建化), what level Dali could have reached had it been allowed to continue developing on its own is something we can no longer possibly know. It was too close to China—this was its misfortune.

Although the Yuan Dynasty destroyed Dali, it ultimately preserved the local achievements of ***feudalization*** to a large extent through the *Tusi* (土司 / native chieftain) system.

However, once the Ming Dynasty was established, the armies of the **bureaucratic empire** once again entered the Yunnan region from Guizhou, moving from east to west. They destroyed the local history and culture on a massive scale. The perspective of ***the Central Plains dynasties*** once again dominated this land, and Kunming returned to its former position as the capital.

On the other hand, as the Ming and Qing empires carried out *Gaitu Guiliu* (改土归流 / integrating local chieftains into the regular bureaucratic system) under military pressure, the power of the *Tusi* gradually waned. Today, Yunnan and Guizhou show little difference from the interior.

Yet, the eastward shift of the ruling center in the Southwest likely still produced certain consequences. One must realize that the borders of power for Nanzhao and the Dali Kingdom, with Dali as their capital, did not stop anywhere near the modern-day Yunnan borderline; rather, they penetrated deeply into the territories of Myanmar and Laos.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, viewing the situation as a whole, China's southwestern borders continually retreated inward. It would be one thing if a formidable power had been exerting prolonged oppression, but the foreign regions neighboring Yunnan today remain the most typical weak-state regions in the world. For instance, the Myanmar government currently cannot even control its own northern and eastern territories.

Therefore, although during the Ming and Qing periods a strong Myanmar power would occasionally expand to the Chinese border and fight a battle or two with the Chinese Empire, a sustained high-pressure threat simply did not exist. After all, the Burmese had to invest massive amounts of energy

in the south, waging hegemonic wars with Thailand. Thus, I incline to believe that the retraction of China's southwestern frontier over the last few centuries was driven more by administrative incapacity (无法管理).

My discoveries regarding Yunnan will pause here for now. I believe two points drawn from this are worth noting:

First, China's corrupted official historiography (伪史) obviously does not exclusively plague historical facts concerning ***the Central Plains***; the histories of peripheral ethnic regions have likewise suffered massive distortions. By now, I already feel that absolutely no common domestic historical conclusion is worthy of trust without undergoing repeated and rigorous scrutiny.

Second, it highlights exactly how much difficulty the habitual Sino-centric perspective causes when I attempt to view other regions. Had I not promptly discarded **the Central Plains-centric historical view** (以中原为中心的历史视角), it would have been exceedingly difficult to accept the fact that during the Nanzhao and Dali periods, this micro-world of the Southwest expanded from west to east.

Today, Kunming has over 8 million people, Zhaotong over 5 million, Chuxiong over 2 million, while Dali has a mere population of less than 800,000. Obviously, this demographic distribution in the Southwest cannot be viewed entirely as the natural consequence of socioeconomic conditions; it is, even more so, the inevitable result driven by prolonged political factors.

Clearly, every nation in the world, whether advanced or backward, is perpetually seeking ways to cope with change. Therefore, one cannot ignore the subjective willingness and capability of any historically existing ethnic regime to "author" its own history.

Finally, this correction has also integrated the Southwest region into the "framework" (框架) I had already pre-established, perfectly answering the original conundrums. This once again proves the vitality of the framework itself.

Chapter 6: Regarding the Ruling Class

At the very end of 2022, I finally realized a consequence I had never considered before; my worldview was reshaped within a few short days. What exactly this discovery implies, even today I cannot provide a definitive answer.

It is undoubtedly a tragedy first and foremost, yet it is also an undeniable victory—a victory belonging to the scientific spirit and human free thought.

This discovery might harbor the opportunity for change. It may seem too early to say so now, but I suppose even in the first century of the birth of modern science, the vast majority of humanity's most crucial inventions derived from experience rather than the guidance of scientific theory. But no enterprise is accomplished overnight. People must always first learn to understand the world, and only upon the foundation of understanding does the possibility of progressive transformation through subjective initiative (主观能动性) arise. I believe that regardless, it should be recorded first, for it will inevitably aid those who read it later.

1. Letting the Ruling Class Rule was the Optimal Solution in Historical Periods

A question had troubled me for a very long time. When I compared the political reforms that occurred in Japan and China over the last millennium, I found that although the Chinese court also attempted to reduce expenses through means like cutting the number of officials, its primary method was always to "broaden the sources of income" (开源)—that is, exhausting all means to increase tax revenues.

Conversely, while Japanese Shoguns and *Daimyos* also attempted to increase income through means like stimulating industries, what they emphasized most was always to "cut expenditures" (节流)—that is, demanding that the *Samurai* reduce unnecessary consumption and practice frugality.

Now, this question, along with other striking differences between China and Japan—such as Japan's free and prosperous ***early modern*** (近世) civil culture, the ability of Japanese peasants to negotiate directly with the ruling class and sign contracts, and the astonishing discrepancies in the form, intensity, and objectives of Sino-Japanese peasant uprisings—are all answered by the same fundamental fact.

Namely: **In Japan, the ruling class *actually* exercised rule; whereas in China, the ruling class failed to do so, and the entity exercising political power was a *detached bureaucratic stratum* (**脱产的官僚阶层**)** *(or "class"—in fact, the degree of confusion with which Chinese people use these terms surpasses an outsider's imagination)*.

The disastrous articulation of the term "ruling class" initially stemmed from the imprudence of Marx and Engels, but I sense that in China, the concept of this term has been deliberately obfuscated.

Simply put, in the context of contemporary Chinese, the term "ruling class" possesses two meanings. First, it refers to the class that holds a dominant position in economic production—that is, this class controls the primary means of production (or factors of production). Second, it refers to the class that grasps state power and rules politically.

The greatest misstep of Marx and Engels lay in the fact that they themselves grew up in Europe. When they observed their surroundings during the prime of their lives, what they saw was not just any random corner of the globe, but a Europe that had successfully traversed the ***feudalization*** (封建化) stage, successfully traversed the ***early modern absolute state stage***, and had already reached the ***capitalist era*** (资本主义时代).

The "world" they were familiar with was a far cry from the world as a whole, because it was the most successful region among all parts of the world. In terms of the completeness of social development, it is certainly representative; but if one wishes to observe the successes and failures in the history of human societies, it possesses no representativeness whatsoever. It is just like how you cannot judge the level of an entire class solely by looking at the few students with the best grades.

If we count from the early city-states of the Aegean Sea, excluding the Eastern European regions ruled by Russia, the rest of Europe completely experienced every conventional evolutionary stage of human history, and nowhere did any anomalies (异变) occur. This means that Europe's ruling class always experienced a complete life cycle: rising, developing during transition periods, exercising independent class rule, declining during transition periods, and exiting the historical stage.

Marx and Engels lived in an era where ***capitalism*** (资本主义) was booming and their home of Europe possessed an absolute advantage over the whole world. In their lifetimes and from their perspective, the bourgeoisie was going through the stage of ambitiously executing its class rule. Moreover, looking back at European history, they did not observe any "anomalies."

Therefore, they made a presumptive judgment on a fatal question: **that the class holding the dominant position economically *inevitably* attains power politically, and consequently, the ideology of this class becomes the dominant ideology.**

However, this assumption is fundamentally wrong. From here on, when I use the term "ruling class," I am referring solely to the class that dominates economic production, without necessarily affirming that it has already acquired state power.

The histories of China and Japan demonstrate that the political power of the ruling class is fundamentally not obtained naturally. In certain cases, this ruling power must be seized through struggle (as in Japan), and there are cases where the seizure of power fails (as in China).

In reality, Marx and Engels completely ignored this crucial class struggle—namely, **the struggle of the ruling class to seize power**. Almost all varieties of self-proclaimed Marxists have, intentionally or unintentionally, neglected this point, virtually equating class struggle exclusively with the movement of the ruled class rebelling against the ruling class. Exactly how this neglect originally formed could probably only be understood by peering into the minds of Marx and Engels themselves back then; today, we can only offer some deductions.

Looking at the target of the ruling class's struggle, it is naturally not the ruled class, but rather a non-productive, *rentier stratum* (食利阶层) that possesses the power to comprehensively distribute social resources. It does not necessarily manifest in a highly homogenous form; for example, in China, it manifested as highly pure hierarchical bureaucrats (科层官僚), while in Byzantium, alongside bureaucrats, a portion manifested as the Orthodox Church.

But regardless, this target obstructing the ruling class from seizing power inherently possesses the power to manipulate state apparatuses. Therefore, practically viewing it as the "government" itself is not unwarranted.

Such a monstrosity (怪胎) cannot be generated under just any conditions. Tracing its origins, it dates back to periods of **class transition** where the expansion of government power failed to recede normally. The example of China has made this abundantly clear, and the same holds true for Byzantium, situated between Europe and Asia. This regime never experienced complete ***feudalization*** and instead increasingly exhibited the characteristics of Oriental Despotism (东方君主制).

Russia provides a very recent example *(I might discuss this country again in the future)*. In the process of transitioning from the **feudal system** to a ***capitalist society***, we first note that Russia's **feudal system** developed incompletely; the personal power of the Tsar overwhelmed the feudal contracts among lords, which subsequently meant Russia's bourgeoisie also developed incompletely. The consequence of doing so was that Russia's ***early modern period*** became incredibly protracted, and the absolute regime did not completely collapse until World War I.

However, the Soviet Bolshevik regime established thereafter was even more cunning. Lenin and his cohorts exploited the oversight of Marx and Engels to provide justification for an even more totalitarian and terroristic bureaucratic rule. Furthermore, alongside their so-called "export of revolution" policies, they scattered these disastrous consequences across the globe, and to this day, their pernicious legacy remains unpurged.

From the above perspectives, I believe the earliest oversight by Marx and Engels was largely due to one point: **they far too deeply underestimated the power and consciousness of the government itself.**

An organization numbering in the tens of thousands, aggregating the social elites, capable of partially controlling and guiding social wealth, and manipulating the apparatuses of violence, could *never* possibly play the role of an obedient robot.

Historically speaking, the ruling class *must* tame such a machine to serve itself. If it cannot defeat and conquer it, then it can only become a slave under the whip of the state apparatus—let alone transforming its own ideology into the mainstream ideology of society.

For instance, in China, we can find "thousands" of examples demonstrating that the will of the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) was never translated into the will of the state. One particularly critical issue is the so-called inheritance system.

If we observe the typical ***feudal societies*** that once existed in Europe or Japan, it is not difficult to discover that as the feudal system matured, estate inheritance increasingly leaned toward concentration in the hands of specific offspring (primarily the eldest son), rather than the widespread **partible inheritance** (析产) seen during the early stages of ***feudalization***.

Simple logical deduction helps us understand the inevitability of this evolution. For societies in early ***feudalization***, production in small social units is the most efficient; thus, partible inheritance among children is advantageous for expanding the family's total ***productive forces***.

As ***productive forces*** further develop to such a degree that even production in small social units generates considerable surplus, not only does society's demand for material exchange rise, but people—especially the ruling class—will realize that concentrating this surplus for investment (utilization) *(which refers not just to economic investment, but more likely political investment)* is vastly more beneficial for the development of the entire family. Any observer looking at the entire developmental trajectory of the ***Middle Ages*** in Europe and Japan would find it exceedingly difficult to ignore this obvious shift in inheritance systems.

However, in China, due to the failure of ***feudalization***, the bureaucratic system flagrantly carried out its restoration beginning with the Sui and Tang empires. A fact easily observable to people is that, starting from the Tang Dynasty, the laws of successive dynasties comprehensively supported the system of equal property division.

If we stand from the viewpoint of the bureaucrats—especially the emperor himself—then this legal policy indeed thwarted the capacity of the ***feudal landlords*** **(**封建领主**)** to interfere in politics.

Contrary to the CCP's propaganda that evil landlords exploiting the common people were omnipresent throughout China, the degree of land concentration in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties was considerably weak. In some places, such as the Guanzhong region in Shaanxi where I currently live, claiming that landlords played any leading role in the local economy is sheer flattery.

Therefore, we can say with absolute certainty: **although from the Sui and Tang down to the Qing Dynasty, China's *theoretical* ruling class was the *landlord class*, in the face of overwhelming bureaucratic rule, it was utterly impossible for them to extend their will to the entire society.**

The greatest tragedy of Marx and Engels lay in the fact that they could not possibly have seen another possibility existing thousands of miles away. The Germany where they lived their youth was a region where state power had long been exceedingly weak. Ever since the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期), the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor had plummeted, and hundreds of princes had acted autonomously for centuries.

Growing up in such an environment and historical memory, Marx and Engels inevitably developed a mindset along the lines of *"what does the government even amount to?"*

After all, the flow of information in the 19th century was not as convenient as today, so expecting two sociologists back then to earnestly understand the historical developmental paths of different regions worldwide was indeed difficult. Thus, Marx and Engels, based on the prejudices of their own lived experiences, arrived at a disastrous conclusion.

Over the past century or more, and throughout my life from childhood to the present, people have been enthusiastic about discussing the disastrous consequences caused by the ruling class exploiting the ruled class. Yet, almost no one discusses what happens if the ruling class is *unable* even to exercise class rule.

Now, judging from this brilliant comparison between China and Japan, an atypical class society can only result in far more severe catastrophes.

Returning to the issue of political reforms in the histories of these two countries makes this abundantly clear. In Japan, the ruling class was genuinely ruling the state, and they themselves were directing economic production. Therefore, any attempt to extort more exorbitant taxes and miscellaneous levies (苛捐杂税) from society was, essentially, slicing flesh off their own bodies to eat. Consequently, although Japanese rulers also encouraged the development of specialized industries, their primary method during reforms could never be to enhance their capacity to extract social wealth; they would only highly emphasize reducing unnecessary consumption—that is, cutting expenditures (节流).

However, in China, the political structure was vastly different. The bureaucrats ruling here constituted a ***detached stratum*** (脱产的阶层); they themselves did not engage in social production. Therefore, when political crises intensified, the first reaction of the Chinese bureaucrats and emperor was always to expand the scope and intensity of taxation as much as possible, because no matter what, this was not slicing flesh directly off the rulers.

For the rulers of the Chinese ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家), both the peasants (as the ruled class) and the landlords (as the ruling class) were subjects to be ruled over. Given the opportunity, the bureaucracy would absolutely never let slip the chance to exploit them. Under such circumstances, expecting the imperial family and the bureaucratic class to prioritize frugality is simply the pipe dream of a madman (痴人说梦).

Obviously, the differences between these two systems do not merely appear in short-term policy choices; over the long span of history, they can only become ever more pronounced.

First, only when the class that economically dominates production grasps political power do they actually possess the strength and willingness to undertake the work of improving production. This is because they possess both the administrative means to execute improvements and the capability to ensure that the profits generated by production advancements belong to themselves, rather than inexplicably falling into the hands of the government.

Therefore, when the ruling class indeed possesses the ruling power, production surpluses are overwhelmingly channeled into investments for expanded reproduction, as well as into supporting science, culture, and the arts—which have longer return cycles *(the so-called technological investment)*. This very investment and demand is the fundamental guarantee for the emergence of modern science and technology.

In a ***bureaucratic state***, however, any production surplus is completely exhausted, layer by layer, entirely within the bureaucratic system itself. The amount available for expanding production is infinitesimally small. In fact, judging from our country's history, in the late stages of every dynasty, when the bureaucratic system became hyper-inflated and dysfunctional, let alone expanding production, it became impossible to even maintain the current scale of production. What inevitably followed was the **total collapse of the entire society (**全社会的总崩溃**)** and the deaths of tens of millions of people.

It must be pointed out that the "total collapse of society" mentioned here does not mean the social production in every single region within China's borders disintegrated simultaneously. Rather, certain vital regions of China collapsed first, and the ensuing famines, plagues, mass refugee flights, and peasant wars triggered a domino effect. These regions that collapsed first were often the most profoundly suffering lands in China—primarily the Great Plains north of the Yangtze River and the

Yellow River flooded areas (黄泛区)—where the destructive power of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** **(**复辟官僚体制**)** reached its absolute zenith. Under specific conditions, the occurrence of natural disasters could also cause a certain region to collapse first, because weakened by the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, ancient Chinese society severely lacked resilience against natural calamities.

Second, history demonstrates that when the ruling class directly grasps political power, it has a far greater need to interact directly with the ruled class. This is especially true in the ***feudal era***, a highly specific class society.

As mentioned earlier, the ruling class possessing land in a ***feudal society*** resided much more dispersed across vast rural areas compared to the class societies that preceded and succeeded it. This led to a phenomenon they had no choice but to face: for ***feudal lords***, especially grassroots ***feudal lords***, the time they had to invest in dealing with the ruled peasants was even vastly greater than the time spent dealing with other ***feudal lords***.

Looking back at the origins of human history from the vantage point of ***modern society*** today, there is no doubt that it was precisely the interactions between rulers and the ruled during the ***feudal era*** that forged many of the cornerstones of ***modern society***—including contracts, civil rights awareness, and the concept of the sacred inviolability of private property.

When I read the history of Japan's Muromachi period, what shocked me the most was the degree of importance the Japanese back then attached to contractual documents. Later, when I read about the land surveys (*Kenchi* / 检地) conducted by the Oda-Toyotomi (*Shokuhō*) regime during the Azuchi-Momoyama period—the transition from the ***Chūsei*** (***Middle Ages***) to the ***early modern period***—I was stunned beyond words to learn that the magistrates (*Bugyō* / 奉行) dispatched by the government would have the land survey results of each village confirmed by the villagers themselves, and a copy would be retained within the village!

The government and the common people signed contracts in such explicitly clear ways, and both sides acknowledged their validity. From the ***Middle Ages*** onward, when Japanese commoners believed taxes were unreasonable, they would righteously bring out their contractual documents to protest. **This is something utterly and entirely unimaginable in China.**

As for urban autonomy and feudal contracts, the various countries of Western Europe clearly went much further, which is arguably a crucial factor as to why modern civilization was born there.

Third, the ***bureaucratic state*** severely suppressed people's thoughts, especially for the ruling class, who otherwise possessed the surplus capacity for scientific research.

This suppression initially manifested in draconian censorship. When reading the history of the Edo period, I often find it difficult to comprehend Japanese scholars' definition of "literary inquisitions" (文字狱). Because a writer published a work the Shogunate did not wish to see published, he was penalized with 50 days of wearing handcuffs—yet the Japanese actually deemed this an *"unforgivable crime of a despotic government severely violating human rights."*

To be completely honest, such a perspective is simply too "progressive" for the vast majority of Chinese residents; one must realize that even today, illegal detention has yet to vanish in our country. During the contemporaneous Ming and Qing dynasties, if one was implicated in a literary inquisition, managing to spare one's entire clan from execution was already considered fortunate *(in popular terms, female family members were generally exiled or forced into the Jiaofangsi / state brothels)*. Merely facing 50 days of detention would be utterly unimaginable.

European political persecution appears equally laughable to the Chinese. Not even mentioning the Renaissance and subsequent periods, take the ***High Middle Ages***: even if distinct heretical thoughts (异端思想) and suspected witches appeared in a locality, the Catholic Church would surprisingly organize a court to conduct a trial! This is simply inconceivable. In our country, if the emperor intends to kill one of his subjects, he need only fabricate any pretext at will. Why, then, would he undergo rigorous legal procedures for a trial? In Chinese History, the judiciar is nothing more than a performance.

However, direct ideological control is not even the most crucial aspect. In China, Shang Yang (商鞅)—a thinker renowned for his expertise in taming humanity—heavily emphasized that **rather than controlling people's thoughts, it is far better to render them fundamentally incapable of thinking at all.** (Although it is widely recognized within China that *The Book of Lord Shang* (*Shangjun Shu*) was not entirely the creation of Shang Yang himself—undoubtedly featuring "contributions" from his disciples and like-minded successors—Chinese people generally attribute the ideology within the text collectively to him for the sake of clarity. Shang Yang himself has come to exist almost as a *cultural symbol*.)

In fact, Chinese rulers are exceptionally adept at this. In our country, the ultimate goal of so-called "management" is to inflict endless trouble upon the managed, forcing them to continuously make "mistakes" and thereby fabricating excuses to punish them. In such an environment, whether it is the peasants as the ruled class or the landlords as the ruling class, it is exceedingly difficult for anyone to engage in complex thinking beyond mere survival. The former only wishes to ensure they do not starve to death tomorrow, while the latter is forced to constantly maneuver and flatter within the bureaucratic system just to maintain their existing status.

Bluntly speaking, from the Sui and Tang dynasties all the way until the late Qing was forced to open its doors, I have genuinely never heard of or learned about any Chinese thinker worth mentioning. In reality, regarding the Chinese intellectuals of the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties,

not a single one clearly knew what historical stage they were currently in, let alone possessed any judgment regarding the direction of the future.

It was not until the late Ming and early Qing, during an event as profoundly shocking to the Han people as the Manchus ***Entering the Pass* (*Ru Guan* / 入关)**, that a select few individuals seemingly caught a glimpse of certain clues—only to retreat back into the fortress of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism (程朱理学) within a short span of two generations.

In a ***bureaucratic state***, people find it difficult to conduct scientific research, and pragmatically have absolutely no motivation to pursue such enterprises. Here, no scientific creation can be translated into protected wealth and honor; stripping away these rewards is effortlessly easy for the court, and costs the latter absolutely nothing.

Is this situation not exactly the same today? People value official ranks while disregarding academic degrees. Essentially, this is because official ranks play a decisive role in the allocation of social resources. This is precisely the goal Shang Yang wished to achieve back then: *"All benefits issue from a single hole"* (利出一孔)—making academic pursuits utterly worthless by comparison.

Coupled with the fact that the ***bureaucratic state*** was equipped with the imperial examination system (科举制度)—a potent weapon—it could achieve indirect control over society's value orientations and ideologies without resorting to armed force, ensuring that all inventions and discoveries capable of instigating change would end in miscarriage.

If we summarize the three points above, we will find that they are listed precisely in the sequence of Marx and Engels' fundamental standpoint: that matter determines consciousness, and ***social being*** (社会存在) determines ***social consciousness*** (社会意识).

The **first point** indicates that compared to a class society, people in a bureaucratic society lack both the surplus capacity and the willingness (既无余力也无意愿) to expand production, improve technology, and invest in the fields of science, culture, and the arts. Therefore, from the perspective of the development of ***productive forces*** (生产力), a bureaucratic society is inevitably subjected to colossal restrictions.

The **second point** indicates that compared to a class society, the Chinese bureaucratic society did not experience the effective restructuring of social relations seen since the ***Middle Ages***, fundamentally lacking the essential elements to enter ***modern society***. This means its ***relations of production*** (生产关系) are extremely backward and deformed.

The **third point** indicates that compared to a class society, China's bureaucratic society is far more imprisoned and reactionary in thought. Let alone any progress in people's worldviews, philosophies of life, values, or the scientific and cultural knowledge they possess, numerous pieces of evidence actually prove that over the last millennium, the cognitive level of our country's populace has been regressing *(relevant content will be supplemented later)*. This means that from the perspective of ***social consciousness***, this is no longer a question of progress or backwardness; I believe the term **"degeneration"** (退化) is perhaps far more fitting.

Such layered, compounding shackles utterly strangled the possibility of our country entering modern civilization. Bluntly speaking, just looking at the disastrous ecological deterioration during the late Qing Dynasty, if the "strong ships and powerful cannons" (坚船利炮) of the foreigners had not blown open China's gates, it is hard to say that this place would not have turned into a supersized Easter Island, or at least a supersized Mesopotamian Plain *(where the core civilization could not ensure its own political security and was perpetually and repeatedly conquered by peripheral ethnic groups)*.

In fact, judging from the frequent ***Ru Guan*** (***Entering the Pass*** / 入关) by peripheral ethnic minorities during the latter half of China's imperial era, becoming a supersized Mesopotamia can no longer be called a mere possibility, but a harsh reality.

Only by earnestly understanding China's historical trajectory will people emphasize a fact that *must* be emphasized: in a class society, cruel oppression by the ruling class over the ruled class indeed exists. However, in the past, when ***productive forces*** (生产力) could not possibly support a classless communist society, **"letting the ruling class rule" was indeed history's optimal solution.**

This, of course, does not mean that the struggles of the ruled class rebelling against the ruling class were meaningless. The histories of both Europe and Japan demonstrate that uprisings by the lower classes genuinely propelled social progress and forced the ruling class to reform its rule. The proper historical trajectory of humanity was thus jointly created by both the ruling and ruled classes.

Even if one finds these theoretical analyses difficult to discern, they need only look at the history that actually occurred in our country to effortlessly conclude: for the ruled class—which constitutes the vast majority of the population—dealing with the ruling class is vastly superior to falling, alongside the ruling class, into the massive cage of the bureaucratic system within a bureaucratic society.

Anyone who understands Chinese history cannot possibly avoid being shocked by our country's violently fluctuating historical population curves. During dynastic transitions, one-third to two-thirds of the entire country's population would be collectively wiped out. From the millions dead in the late Han Dynasty to the potentially hundred million dead during the Taiping Rebellion (and the

synchronous surrounding wars), the scale of a *single* population annihilation would be enough to wipe out an entire European country, with deaths to spare.

A deeply traumatic historical event like the Black Death occurred merely once for Westerners, but for the Chinese, it was inevitably seen once every ten generations. Events of staggering abnormal mortality caused by wars, famines, and plagues did not cease until the latter half of the last century.

While the element of natural disasters cannot be ruled out, how could such dense and cruel catastrophes occurring exclusively in China *not* be the disastrous consequence of the collapse of social functions *(functions that include not just maintaining order, but also correcting and curbing tyranny)*?

There are still many photographs and historical documents proving the existential state of the Chinese commoners during the late Qing. We do not even need to compare them to Europe, which dominated the world at the time; merely contrasting them with our neighbor, Japan, is sufficient. The verdict on who succeeded and who failed is absolutely self-evident.

As for Marx and Engels specifically, the mistakes they made back then were no big deal. After all, when a person stands at the frontier of a field with no predecessors to follow, making mistakes is exceptionally normal. If Marx and Engels definitely made any mistake, it was perhaps being overly confident and overestimating the developmental level of social sciences and philosophy at the time, believing they could guide the operation of the world or even navigate natural sciences—a notion stringently trained scientists naturally disbelieve.

Standing at the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century, I believe the path adopted by the so-called social democratic parties of Europe is relatively rational. Regardless of the actual validity of the theories of their "mentors," Marx and Engels, these socialist parties—who supposedly *"capitulated to the bourgeoisie"*—will, sooner or later, sort the true from the false through realistic practice.

The entities that truly warped this mistake into a regime of extreme atrocity were the Russian Bolshevik Party led by Lenin.

These conspirators (野心家) fully exploited the fatal oversight of Marx and Engels—who ignored the fact that the government, as an independent ***stratum*** (阶层), could wield colossal power, and mischaracterized the primary contradiction of ***social being*** as solely the antagonism between the **ruling and the ruled classes** (统治阶级与被统治阶级)—using Marxism to endorse their own totalitarian bureaucratic rule.

Lenin's "creativity" lay in the fact that he theoretically embellished the general bureaucratic politics generated during the process of **class transition**, which the Soviet Union and the subsequent regimes established under its influence termed the **"Vanguard"** (先锋队).

Consequently, within the context of the so-called communist states since the Soviet Union, the bureaucratic regimes they established were no longer viewed as the natural outcome of social development, but rather as combat machines that absolutely *had* to be established to overthrow the old society.

In reality, however, they were neither willing nor able to destroy an old society. All these varied forms of propaganda ultimately served only to provide legitimacy for bureaucratic rule. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union concealed the staggering privileges held within the Party, and framed all the catastrophes caused by bureaucratic rule as "necessary sacrifices" on the path to a new society.

Most importantly, by the 20th century, the science and technology possessed by humanity were incomparable to previous eras. This enabled the rulers of Soviet-style states to blatantly erect imaginary enemies—first the landlords, later the capitalists—without needing to at least superficially acknowledge the scholar-elites (士绅) as the pillars of the state, as the Ming and Qing bureaucratic empires did. This was because, following the Industrial Revolution, the power possessed by the government had become vastly stronger than ever before.

Up to the present, this is blatantly the most malicious and maximally destructive political system, accompanied by the most dangerous political propaganda, to have ever appeared in human history. It bears absolutely no comparison to the Nazis' short-lived twelve-year "Thousand-Year Reich." In the long run, the destruction wrought by Hitler absolutely cannot be mentioned in the same breath as that caused by the Soviet Union.

2, Giving Civilization to the Years, Not Years to Civilization

Thus, before the end of 2022, I evidently confirmed an exceedingly sorrowful conclusion. However, discovering these things clearly cannot allow a person's thoughts to linger merely at the level of grief. According to general observation, when people receive a relatively immense shock, they will further seek solace.

On the eve of the winter vacation, I found myself involuntarily pondering certain questions. I realized that Chinese people place far too much emphasis on possessing a "long history." We always pretend not to know that civilizations will perish, just as we vehemently taboo the topic of death in everyday life.

Now, I believe this is wrong. Just as the verses written about the execution of Taira no Atsumori (平敦盛) in *The Tale of the Heike* (《平家物语》) state: *"Once one attains life, who can avoid the fate of perishing!"* (*"一度得生者，谁能不灭哉！"*)

Modern cosmology even posits that the universe might expand infinitely. When entropy (熵) increases to its absolute limit, let alone matter, even time itself can no longer be said to exist. What reason, then, is there to believe that the achievements created by humanity will continue eternally?

Obviously, Chinese philosophy in the past—if the simplistic thinking of our country's scholars could even be called philosophy—rarely considered this question seriously. If anything could compel the Chinese to consider it, it was probably Buddhism introduced from India. However, as the Buddhist organizations were severely dismantled during the restoration of the ***bureaucratic state*** **(**官僚国家**)** , its ideologies vulgarized accordingly. By the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, this question seemed to have entirely faded from people's field of vision.

Therefore, I profoundly admire the philosophers of the Western ***classical era***. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius pondered this issue in his *Meditations*. Even earlier, the Homeric epics proclaimed: *"For in my heart and soul I know this well: the day will come when sacred Troy must die, Priam must die and all his people with him."*

When the renowned Roman general Scipio Aemilianus (小西庇阿 / Scipio Africanus the Younger) stood upon the ruins of Carthage after annihilating the enemy state, he too felt a deep sense of melancholy and recited that exact line from the *Iliad*. He deeply understood that "all good things must come to an end" (天下没有不散的筵席). Rome had defeated its formidable foe, but even Rome could not exist eternally.

It is precisely because of this incident that Scipio Aemilianus became one of my favorite illustrious generals. I believe that even as a general, one is inherently a human being first. The formidable cognitive capability—especially the introspection (内省)—demonstrated by Scipio Aemilianus is precisely what the so-called illustrious generals of ancient China lacked.

In fact, I believe that apart from a very few exceptions like Han Xin (韩信), those so-called Chinese illustrious generals were exactly what Liu Bang called them: *"meritorious hounds"* (功狗). It is true they were skilled in battle, but *why* were they fighting? What should be done *after* the battle? Where lay the meaning of their own lives? They rarely pondered these questions, or were incapable of pondering them. Therefore, they could only serve as the capable hunting dogs of the emperor.

Returning to the main point: when I reflect upon the histories of the East and the West, I feel deeply that we have walked down a completely erroneous path (from a philosophical perspective).

Many civilizations were born in Western history and no longer exist today: Crete, Mycenae, ancient Greece, and ancient Rome—they have all become part of history. But civilization is like a dandelion (蒲公英). A single dandelion cannot live forever, but its seeds can be carried by the wind to distant lands, taking root and blooming into new flowers.

Has the original dandelion truly disappeared completely? Can the modern Western world truly find no trace of ancient Greece and Rome today? Obviously not.

The rise and fall of civilizations, much like the metabolism of human affairs, is undeniably an unstoppable force. But this does not mean the history written by every civilization is nihilistic (虚无的). During the time it existed, it may have birthed magnificent philosophies, created phenomenal inventions, or pushed local society massively forward. These enterprises will ultimately not be obliterated; as a legacy, they will become the cornerstones for the establishment of new civilizations, and posterity will be happier because of them. **This is where the meaning of civilization lies, and people should accept this fact with tranquility.**

This is exactly why I adore the ancient Sumerian epic, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. When Gilgamesh endured untold hardships to seek the path to immortality, the answer he ultimately received was this: Although he, as a king, could not live forever, he could absolutely make his life extraordinarily meaningful—and the path to doing so was by building his state and treating his people well.

If the Sumerians of forty centuries ago pondered these questions and arrived at their own answers, then the Chinese today should consider this even more seriously.

Chinese people constantly boast about their civilization and the incredibly long years it has endured, but what exactly has it left for the world? It once possessed one-fourth of the world's population; did it create scientific and cultural achievements commensurate with its colossal mass? When people thousands of years from now recall this country, will the only thing that comes to mind be that it slid pathetically toward its doom along a bureaucratic track for over a millennium?

It is just like a human being. I believe that by these recent centuries, it is very difficult to call my motherland "alive." **Does it not resemble a zombie (僵尸)?** A creation that can still move, yet harbors no beneficial thoughts, capable only of inflicting colossal destruction. If a person turns into a zombie, are they still considered alive? Even if considered alive, how much meaning is there in it?

"Give civilization to the years, do not give years to civilization" (要给岁月以文明，不是要给文明与岁月). When I recently met my friend S, he spoke this sentence to me, and I agreed with him profoundly.

3, Social Revolution is a Long-Term Enterprise

I am profoundly dismissive of the anti-intellectual revolutionary propaganda espoused by the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The Bolsheviks invariably proclaimed that revolution was merely about plunging headlong into massive endeavors and charging forward blindly under the command of a "brilliant leader," thereby *"traversing in a mere few decades the path that took the West centuries to complete."*

Now I know these are entirely fabrications. **Early modernization and modernization** (近现代化) are not catalyzed overnight. Or rather, since the dawn of humanity, absolutely no monumental transformation could be achieved in the short term. Without exception, they require prolonged **"social preparation"** (社会准备)—meaning the entire society must cultivate the potential to birth, welcome, and sustain the transformation.

The brief decades of "revolution" as perceived by the Chinese were nothing more than the bugle of victory blown *after* all preconditions were suitably met; by that stage, the pacification of the realm was merely a matter of logical progression.

Chinese people in the past invariably sighed, questioning why Japan reacted so swiftly and effectively when faced with Western encroachment, while the Chinese Empire appeared so sluggish and obtuse.

Today, the answer is glaringly obvious. True, Japan did not even take 100 years to go from the Meiji Restoration to democratization post-World War II, but who remembers how much time and effort was expended for this single century?

Even from the most conservative standpoint, shortly after the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, Japan's social development had already fundamentally parted ways with China's. This means that by the onset of the Meiji Restoration, although Japanese society could not have subjectively aimed to "achieve early modernization," it had, in fact, through ***feudalization*** (封建化), struggled for nearly seven centuries to prepare itself to embrace modern civilization.

Anyone possessing fundamental reasoning capacity can discern that before the West used armed force to compel China and Japan to open their doors, these two countries were already starkly different.

Japan's societal emphasis on contracts and laws, its highly developed civil culture and civil spirit, a literacy rate that left the rest of Asia in the dust, its rich and diverse grassroots public activities and travel, its exceptional financial practices, and the organized, disciplined, and methodical active resistance of its people—how many of these countless characteristics could be found in late Qing society? Yet, they were the very bedrock of modernization.

People recognized long ago that the future trajectory of a society or a state depends on where it originally came from. However, facts prove that the history exerting a decisive influence on the present is far more ancient than people initially anticipated. It is absolutely not just the past ten, twenty, or even a hundred years that determine the future.

Based on my observations, I incline to believe that the timeframe influencing a society's trajectory spans at least an entire historical stage tracing backward from the current node. This implies that any social revolution is inevitably a long-term enterprise.

From the perspective of someone who is still a student, I term this the **"Examination Principle"** (考试原理). The abrupt, radical leap of any society from one social stage to the next resembles taking an examination.

The duration of the exam is very brief. Take China's *Gaokao* (National College Entrance Examination) for example; the combined time for all subjects does not even total 24 hours. But how many days and nights does an individual sacrifice for those brief hours? If a person completely neglects their studies during regular times, or does not even know what they ought to learn—to the point that everything they absorb is distorted and erroneous—on what grounds can they possibly cope with any examination?

This is precisely why I consider the ideology of the Soviet Bolsheviks to be akin to a cult (邪教). It deceives those students who routinely engage in delinquency, promising them a secret method to pass the exam. But the reality is, while one might occasionally cheat undetected in a real-world exam, who can possibly cheat the evolutionary process of human history?

The Bolsheviks proclaimed: *"Submit entirely to my leadership, contribute your money, your labor, and even your lives. Do not associate with those 'good students'—the only reason they perform well is by exploiting you 'bad students.' Just follow me, shout fanatical slogans, and you will pass the exam."*

Such behavior is virtually indistinguishable from murder for profit. Ultimately, it only benefits the swindlers and thieves, rendering the students—who were already entirely unprepared for the exam—even more devoid of hope. If previously, by following the good students to cram for the final month, they might have at least scraped into an undergraduate program, now they have no chance of even completing an associate degree.

(Of course, I am not engaging in any academic discrimination here. It is simply that in the social environment where I live, no analogy is more vivid than the Gaokao. A normal society should logically be one where all people are equal, regardless of academic background, race, or gender.)

However, herein lies the profound tragedy. Since every decisive social transformation requires long-term social preparation, the countries that are the most entirely unprepared or have already strayed onto a derailed path are the very ones most susceptible to embracing such malicious agitation. They delude themselves into believing they have found a path to survival, completely oblivious to the fact that this path will only plunge the nation and its people into even more horrific catastrophes.

This is a colossal tragedy in human society.

4, Adjustments to the Definition of Class Society

Reflecting on the systemic ideological deception prevalent over the past decade evokes a profound sense of indignation. It has become unprecedentedly clear to me the sheer magnitude of atrocities an unchecked state apparatus is capable of committing—a reality that was previously unimaginable.

The most ludicrous aspect is that the ones who truly sentenced these states to death theoretically were none other than Marx and Engels, the revered founding fathers of scientific socialism.

For example, a highly classic issue is the question of the ***"primary factor of production"*** (首位生产要素), which is used to explain why humanity experiences different stages of class societies.

Since the emergence of surplus products and subsequent class differentiation in human society, along with the development of ***productive forces*** (生产力), three factors of production have successively leaped to the premier position among all factors: labor, land, and capital.

*(A detail must be pointed out here: for **early states** / 早期国家, the primary object of exploitation should be more precisely articulated as "primary labor" / 初级劳动力 rather than just "labor." The former emphasizes sheer physical strength. Because, in every sense, knowledge itself is a component of labor. We can recall that for Egypt and Mesopotamia during the Bronze Age and earlier, although there was no shortage of slaves engaged in technical work, the advanced knowledge and production techniques of that era were still primarily in the hands of the **priestly class** / 祭司阶级, secular rulers, and freemen. If we roughly divide labor into primitive labor—i.e., physical strength—plus intellectual capital—i.e., knowledge—the situation becomes much clearer).*

(This is precisely why the term "factors of production" / 生产要素 is used instead of "means of production" / 生产资料. Because in the Marxist context, labor does not belong to the means of production, but is merely a factor of production; whereas land and capital are encompassed by both).

What exactly is meant by the "premier position" (首要位置)? This is indeed not particularly easy to explain for someone like me who lives in a bureaucratic society (官僚社会). My country has not been in a typical class society for 14 centuries; after all, in the land where I live, *"nothing under heaven is greater than official authority"* (天大地大不如官大).

Therefore, based on my shallow understanding, the so-called "premier position" encompasses at least three connotations. *(If someone more knowledgeable reads my records in the future, they can correct me!)*

First, a certain factor of production occupying the premier position implies that its contribution to social production is the greatest.

Second, a certain factor of production occupying the premier position implies that the ***relations of production*** (生产关系) must be adjusted around it as the center. Consequently, the entire society must also be organized according to the characteristics of this factor of production. In particular, this special status of the ***primary factor of production*** will profoundly influence the societal value orientation and overall consciousness.

Third, a certain factor of production occupying the premier position implies that it possesses the capacity to "transform" into other requisite factors of production. This means that as long as one possesses it, there will naturally be no shortage of the remaining factors of production.

If this point remains somewhat unclear for the more ancient ***slavery societies*** (奴隶制社会) and ***feudal societies*** (封建社会) due to backward logistics and information dissemination *(a point I will supplement later)*, it is glaringly obvious in so-called ***capitalist societies*** (资本主义社会). Because as long as you possess sufficient capital, acquiring land and labor is not difficult at all.

Therefore, as time progresses, when a certain factor of production occupies the premier position, a specific model of (class) society will be generated: for instance, a ***slavery society*** corresponding to labor, a ***feudal society*** corresponding to land, and a ***capitalist society*** corresponding to capital.

In this way, the essence of so-called **class substitution** is precisely the direct reflection upon social structural changes of the process where, propelled by the advancement of production, the relative status of two factors of production waxes and wanes (地位此消彼长).

For instance, a widely focused issue during the process of **early modernization and modernization** (近现代化)—that is, the transition from a ***feudal society*** to a ***capitalist society***—is the commercialization of land. This is, in fact, the external manifestation of the reversal in status between two means of production: land and capital.

Today, people can easily observe that the commercialization of land emerging in the ***late feudal stage*** underwent two processes. **First** was the commercialization of the *output* of the land, centrally manifested in the widespread cultivation of cash crops. **Second** was the land itself *(or more rationally, the concept of land property rights /* 土地产权*)* being thrown into the torrent of the market as a commodity.

If we observe Britain and Japan, we can see how the discrepancies in the completion degree of land commercialization intuitively reflect upon the trajectory of social development.

At the closing stages of the ***Middle Ages***, Britain had already initiated the commercialization of land output *(spearheaded by the Yeomanry)*. Subsequently, through several centuries of the Enclosure Movement (圈地运动)—*(which, of course, could not have been purely a market behavior; obviously, the enclosers could employ coercive administrative measures against the peasants)*—the feudal land structure formed during the ***Middle Ages*** completely disintegrated.

True, although the main driving force of the enclosures in Britain was the great landlords themselves, this did not prevent the movement from practically burying the ***feudal system***. Over the past several centuries, the social order of the ***Middle Ages*** was built upon a hierarchical order reliant on land; lords of all sizes held a place within the aristocratic system precisely because they possessed their own hereditary fiefs.

However, when land itself could be merged and annexed so arbitrarily *(even if it was annexing the land of peasants)*, this sacred order based on land inevitably reached its end. If relying on capital—backed by a modicum of administrative power—could acquire land exceeding that of a former baron or earl, then in what exactly did the "nobility" of these so-called feudal aristocrats reside?

Yet, if we observe Japanese society during the contemporaneous climax of the Enclosure Movement, we quickly realize the glaring difference between the two.

During the Edo period, Japan had undoubtedly achieved the commercialization of land output. We do not even need to look at cash crops; commercial behaviors based merely on the staple grain of

rice had already birthed futures (期货) and candlestick charts (K 线图) in Japan. The degree of commercialization could hardly be called low.

However, Edo Japan under the *Bakuhan* system (幕藩体制) ultimately had the *Samurai* as its actual rulers, with the *Chigyō* system (知行制 / fief system) and feudal master-vassal relationships serving as its political bedrock. Consequently, the commercialization of *land property rights* was inevitably subjected to colossal obstruction.

Even if a wealthy merchant in Osaka possessed wealth rivaling the state, he could not possibly purchase the territory of a *Daimyo* and become a *Daimyo* himself, not even by the lowest standard of 10,000 *Koku* (万石).

It is precisely this discrepancy that allows people to intuitively feel that Britain significantly led Japan on the path of **early modernization and modernization**. Thus, Britain became the first to cross the threshold of early modernization and initiate the Industrial Revolution, whereas Japan, even after opening its doors under Western influence, still took a century fraught with errors to embark on a normal capitalist path.

In this way, we arrive at a glaringly obvious conclusion: **The essence of early modernization and modernization is to make the importance of land decline, while the importance of capital rises.**

Ludicrously, the Bolshevik regimes have completely deceived the people on this point. They proclaimed that *"the key lies in whose hands the land is in,"* and *"as long as nationalization and collectivization are implemented, everything will get better."* These are outright lies.

Take the actual reality of the Land Reform (土改) in mainland China, for instance. Its ultimate goal was nothing more than to control the land through the Party bureaucrats (党官僚 / the latest developmental form of our country's bureaucratic system).

How does their ambition differ from those emperors—starting with Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei (元宏)—who attempted to implement the Equal-field system (均田) under the *Ritsuryō* (律令) system? In essence, it is the act of the bureaucracy controlling the means of production. It absolutely cannot be mentioned in the same breath as the land reform conducted by the Kuomintang (KMT) on the island of Taiwan, which ultimately propelled social progress.

In fact, the success or failure of the mainland's Land Reform can be illustrated by a highly conspicuous example: the fact that "land-based finance" (土地财政) still occupies such a critical

position in the mainland's economic structure. If the importance of land itself had truly declined to a position significantly secondary to capital, this phenomenon would be impossible.

In Japan in the early 1990s, it is true that their nationwide real estate bubble had inflated to massive proportions. But even under those circumstances, who would dare say that Japan's pillar industry was real estate?

Yet in China, this is the reality. Those who do not live here find it difficult to grasp intuitively, but for those who do, it is simply far too commonplace. To coerce ordinary people into emptying the wealth of several generations to buy a house, the Chinese government uses every trick in the book —coaxing and deceiving, using both the carrot and the stick (软硬兼施).

How many people have had their lives ruined by encountering unfinished building projects (烂尾楼)? How many have been saddled with mortgages, living like beasts of burden (牲口) for their entire lives? Have we not seen enough of such tragedies?

What is most terrifying is that there is far too much evidence indicating that the Bolsheviks absolutely did not commit evil out of good intentions. I fear they knew from the very beginning exactly what kind of society they would get. And the mountains of corpses and seas of blood (尸山血海) were exactly what they wanted to achieve, because their privileges were built precisely upon such mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

A very direct piece of evidence is the term **"Comprador"** (买办). In modern China, this term is primarily used to refer to the bourgeoisie in colonial and semi-colonial countries who are dependent on foreign monopoly capital and directly serve imperialism. It appears as the villain in official narratives, embodying the image of the running dogs of imperialism.

However, anyone with even a slight understanding of Chinese historical literature will know that for the past millennium, this term always referred to *"the runners/errand-boys who procured goods and performed duties for the government"* (为官府采购做事的差役).

Bai Juyi's famous poem *The Old Charcoal Seller* (《卖炭翁》) describes it thus: *"Half a bolt of red silk and a length of damask, tied to the ox's head as the price of the charcoal."* (半匹红纱一丈绫, 系向牛头充炭直) This vividly depicts the scene of the *Compradors* (买办) relying on the terrifying authority of the court to extort and plunder the commoners.

Even during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when monarchical despotism was hyper-inflated, bureaucratic intellectuals did not dare to openly deny the harm brought by *Compradors*. *The Veritable Records of Emperor Xuanzong of Ming* (《明宣宗实录》) was forced to bluntly state: *"Recently, local officials, under the pretext of official business, have grown urgent in levying duties; both the rich and the poor are impoverished by the Compradors... resulting in our people lacking clothing and food, wandering destitute, and fleeing."* (比者所司，每缘公务，急于科差，贫富困于买办…以致吾民衣食不给，转徙逃亡。)

The ludicrous part is that when Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the last century translated the foreign concept of "those who work for the colonizers," they astonishingly used this very term—which originally reflected the tyranny of the ***bureaucratic state***! I would like to ask: what exactly was their ulterior motive in doing this?

Even without counting the everyday atrocities and relatively small-scale peasant uprisings during ordinary times, just counting the few massive wars and turmoils since the initial reconstruction of the bureaucratic system in the Sui Dynasty—the turmoils of the late Sui, the An Lushan Rebellion, the turmoils of the late Tang, the turmoils of the late Yuan, the Jingnan Campaign, the social upheaval and wars of the late Ming, the Taiping Rebellion, and other regional violent movements in the late Qing—**the combined unnatural deaths caused by these events alone already exceed two hundred million people.**

If we add the commoners who died due to the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** during those "peaceful years," the population that died unnaturally due to politics from the Sui to the Qing is sufficient to equal the total population of the present-day United States.

And these massive catastrophes were caused either by the inherent flaws of the centralized ***bureaucratic state*** system; or by the total collapse of society when the agricultural economy in the late stages of a dynasty could no longer even maintain its current scale; or by the complete lack of resistance to violent movements organized by religions because the local society was excessively atomized (过度原子化) *(the landmark event being the Dungan Revolt /* 同治回乱*)*.

In their essence, they were all caused by bureaucratic restoration. Nowhere else in the world except China has seen such a staggering number of horrifying demographic implosions.

The unrecorded and unpardonable crimes (罄竹难书的罪行) and continuous agony resulting in hundreds of millions of unnatural deaths suffered by a full 50 generations over 1,300 years *(counting up to the beginning of the last century)* have been so nonchalantly glossed over!

Even if we include the total losses inflicted on China by the Japanese fascist war of aggression, the total destruction caused by *all* foreign aggressors against China from 1840 to the present does not

even amount to one-tenth of the colossal material and spiritual holocaust caused by successive Chinese courts.

Furthermore, imperialist countries did not merely bring destruction to China; they inevitably brought advanced science and technology. The simplest point that even an idiot can understand is this: if the widespread use of fossil fuels brought about by industrialization had not halted environmental collapse, and if modern agriculture and medicine had not allowed people to fill their stomachs and survive diseases, how could China's population possibly have grown from 400 million in the late Qing to 1.4 billion today?

In comparison, have our country's bureaucrats genuinely ever done any enterprise beneficial to society and the common people?

They consciously and purposefully deceive the commoners, saying: *"Now the most hateful enemies are those foreign devils (洋鬼子) and fake-foreign devils (二鬼子).* As for bureaucrats, *only* the bureaucrats who do not belong to us are bad, whereas the bureaucrats belonging to us are the vanguards of social revolution."

5, The Clumsy Lies of the Chinese Rulers

Alas! How could anyone else fathom the sheer depth of my despair when I realized all this!

The Chinese commoners exhibit a myriad of vices, but who exactly turned them into this? For how many ages has the court imprisoned the populace like criminals as a robber would, plundered their wealth and grain like a thief, and deluded their minds like a fraudster?

In the past, when there was an emperor, whatever the emperor proclaimed was absolute truth; everyone existed merely to serve the interests of the "sovereign-father" (君父). The most ludicrous tragedy is that, even today, this remains completely unchanged.

Today, Chinese people still mechanically recite the dogma that *"successive dynasties perished due to land annexation"* (土地兼并). They treat **aristocratic great clans** (门阀) and meritorious nobles (勋贵) as the enemies of the realm, terrified that someone might challenge the supreme authority of the sovereign-father. How utterly farcical!

Setting aside the fact that, judging by China's final two dynasties, land annexation never even formed a significant scale. At the grassroots level, land property rights were shattered and fragmented due to the **partible inheritance** (析产) and systemic suppression enforced by the

bureaucratic state (官僚国家). The number and scale of large landlords bore absolutely no comparison to the whole of Europe, let alone countries like Britain or Poland.

Viewing the **aristocratic great clans** and nobles as social parasites is simply turning black into white (颠倒黑白). Yes, the nobles and aristocratic great clans in Chinese history indeed achieved little, but the question remains: *who made them this way?*

If these landlords or large landlords—who possessed a certain social status—wished to participate more in social governance and shoulder the military obligations of the state, would the emperor have ever permitted it?

It was blatantly the bureaucratic government, headed by the emperor, that feared and guarded against a united ***feudal lord class*** (封建领主阶级). Therefore, the state exhausted every means to weaken them: stripping them of the right to participate in social governance and shoulder military duties, obstructing them by all means from enhancing their strength through technological improvements, and remaining highly vigilant lest they acquire lofty social prestige through any channel. Ultimately, this forced the landed aristocrats into a state of idle, hedonistic consumption, rendering them entirely useless to the realm.

Admittedly, the fact that China's ***landlord class*** failed to seize political power is a historical tragedy, stemming first and foremost from their own incompetence. Yet, no person with conscience can ignore the fact that in the suppression of the ***landlord class***, the ***bureaucratic state*** headed by the emperor was the true perpetrator of the crime.

That such an obvious fact is twisted into an explanation that the landed aristocrats were inherently incompetent parasites contributing nothing to social production—is this not as absurd as an abuser breaking a victim's legs and then mocking them for being disabled?

What leaves one truly dumbfounded is that such a "person," beaten into disability, is actually forced to bear the guilt for the subversion of the entire empire!

A simplest fact is this: in the typical ***feudal societies*** of Europe and Japan, the devastating, realm-sweeping peasant wars characteristic of the late dynasties following China's bureaucratic restoration simply did not exist. The contradictions between peasants and ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) were often resolved within a contained scope. Even in large-scale uprisings, both sides exercised far more restraint than those in Chinese history.

We must point out without any hesitation that the root cause of the total social collapse occurring at the final stage of every cycle of the **Dynastic cycle** (王朝周期律) lies in this: the destruction of

social production by a hyper-inflated bureaucratic system, utterly incapable of self-correction, reached such an extreme that, on a nationwide scale, even maintaining the original scale of economic production became impossible.

Such a degree of annihilation is fundamentally impossible under a ***feudal system*** (封建体制). The ***feudal lords*** themselves were the possessors of the **means of production** (生产资料), the organizers of production, and its direct beneficiaries. Unless they were madmen, they would never drive economic production to such a level of destruction without pulling back from the precipice (悬崖勒马).

Even if one or two madmen inevitably appeared within a certain population base, a ***feudal society*** itself was never a centralized, monistic society like a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家). Lords of all sizes had their own **direct demesnes** (直辖领地) to manage. Even if one or two lords were truly that insane, how could the vast majority of lords nationwide possibly go mad simultaneously?

Yet, our country's current historical propaganda is self-contradictory to this extent: on the one hand, it treats the ***feudal lord class***—persecuted and mutilated by the ***bureaucratic state***—as useless degenerates who only knew how to indulge themselves; on the other hand, it accuses these very "degenerates" of destroying the entire country!

Is this laughable narrative even the slightest bit different from the absurd tale of a robber who beats a person into disability, only to turn around and accuse this disabled person of committing an unforgivable criminal offense—an offense of which the robber himself was the true culprit?

The tragic reality is that the vast majority of Chinese commoners believe this narrative. To them, the court and the emperor are forever wise and infallible; *"their original intentions are always good,"* and the evil ones are always the landlords and local officials.

This narrative, of course, does not solely target the ***landlord class*** as the ruling class. As for the ruled class—who constituted the vast majority of the population—in this narrative, they were fundamentally treated as untouchables with a status no different from livestock.

For instance, when I was in high school, the standard history textbooks would explain why China did not spontaneously generate an Industrial Revolution or enter a ***capitalist society***. Within that explanation, the infamous reply from the Qianlong Emperor to Macartney was invariably cited (*"The Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance..."*).

Students were then told that China's own ***productive forces*** (生产力) were already overproducing, enjoying a trade surplus for consecutive years prior to the massive rise of the opium trade. Therefore, China allegedly lacked both the motivation to improve production and the willingness to proactively undertake overseas expansion.

This explanation is so cunning that it almost always succeeds in deceiving high school students, who, due to academic pressure and shallow life experience, are incapable of profound reflection. They cannot yet comprehend that production and consumption are mutually correlated counterparts; **what is termed "overproduction" is, from another perspective, simply "underconsumption."**

In fact, the history following the Opium War completely proved this point. The reason the British Parliament narrowly approved launching a war against China was ultimately because they presumed that by forcing China to open its doors, they would reap colossal profits from this "massive" Chinese market.

However, the events following the Opium War slapped the British hard in the face: the Chinese were so utterly impoverished that they possessed absolutely zero capacity to consume British products. The entire market of 400 million people in the Qing Dynasty astonishingly could not match that of a single Mexico!

Thus, this issue was twisted from *"Why were the Chinese commoners plunged into such horrific, inhumane extreme poverty?"* into *"How magnificent our country is, capable of producing so much social wealth without even needing machines!"*

The bureaucratic system not only washed its hands of its monstrous crimes, but even more outrageously, it provided a stimulant of nationalism (民族主义的兴奋剂) for the pitiable, unthinking commoners. I would very much like to ask: Who exactly forced the Chinese commoners to struggle day and night on the brink of starvation, to the point that their contribution to consumption was virtually zero?

Actually, if one lives in China for a period of time, they will realize with crystal clarity that, whether in the past or present, the Chinese rulers essentially view their people as livestock. Deep down, they believe that as long as the people can stay alive, they have no need for surplus wealth and are fundamentally unworthy of engaging in consumption.

Among China's "Troika" (三驾马车 / the three major drivers of economic growth) in the past, the only horse that was genuinely galloping was foreign trade and exports. As for investment and consumption—what did they even amount to in the eyes of the rulers?

It wasn't until recent years that this situation was severely exacerbated by a sharp demographic downturn, as the cost advantage of "Made in China" is being neutralized by countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that similarly possess abundant labor forces.

The United States and China have openly engaged in a trade war, while our country's capacity for technological innovation is extremely impoverished, possessing virtually no competitiveness in various industries, especially high-value-added ones. Coupled with the growing estrangement between China and the West, particularly the US, and the fact that our country's so-called "market economy system" is fundamentally a joke *(actually, almost everyone in China knows this, they just don't say it aloud)*, developed countries are naturally far more willing to choose other developing countries with lower costs and safer investment guarantees when relocating their industries.

The galloping horse of foreign exports has finally lost its momentum. The subsequent three years of ludicrous pandemic controls dealt another crushing blow to this already gasping old horse.

Only at this moment did the Chinese rulers suddenly remember "consumption" *(they certainly wouldn't count on investment, because they know full well what kind of investment environment China is).* Officials big and small are desperate to squeeze every last coin out of the commoners. But the commoners have long since been drained of money; countless people have emptied their "coffin savings" (棺材本) just to pay off their mortgages.

Later, a serendipitous incident made me realize that the government has, in fact, been systematically and purposefully guiding and restricting people's thoughts all along.

Young people in China are not unfamiliar with web novels. Even if you hardly read them, as long as you are continually exposed to the internet, you will always hear about one or two breakout works. I myself do not read web novels much, only occasionally scrolling through them when I have nothing to do.

At the end of 2023, I stumbled upon an alternative history novel written by a domestic author. The plot roughly involved overseas Chinese establishing an independent nation during the **Age of Discovery** (地理大发现时代).

After reading a few dozen chapters, I suddenly discovered a statement left by the author at the end of a particular chapter. He explained that his original intended plot was for the Chinese to establish a bourgeois democratic republic overseas. However, the platform's staff told him that to pass the censorship review, **the protagonist of such a novel MUST claim the throne and refer to himself as emperor (称孤道寡).** Therefore, he had no choice but to change the plot to declaring himself emperor overseas. But he added that he would still stick to his ideals; even if he wrote about an emperor, it would absolutely be a constitutional monarchy.

This incident inflicted a colossal shock upon me. For the first time, I felt so tangibly that the land I live in is a gigantic cage (庞大的囚笼). **The Chinese rulers are terrified that the commoners might forget the majesty of the emperor; they fret day and night that one day, the people might discover they actually do not have to kneel when encountering an official.**

6, The Chinese People's Devout Belief in Lies

Setting aside my personal emotions, another conceptual shift brought about by this monumental "setting to rights of things that have been thrown into disorder" (拨乱反正) is that I can finally say with absolute certainty: **the history of our country over the past fourteen centuries is an entirely corrupted official historiography (佞史).**

Today, anyone who cannot set things to rights from the perspective of interrupted ***feudalization*** (封建化) and bureaucratic restoration will continue to be deceived by these lies that have persisted for a millennium. Of the conclusions that Chinese scholars or commoners believe without the slightest doubt, there is almost none that does not require complete re-evaluation.

Bluntly speaking, anyone with even a slight understanding of Chinese society can easily notice one point: when Chinese people view historical issues, they involuntarily and subconsciously "consider things from the emperor's perspective" (为皇上考虑). They fundamentally never reflect on whether their premises are correct; they never suspect whether the centralized **bureaucratic system** itself is right; and they never once consider whether history might have had other possibilities.

Take some simple examples. During China's imperial era, there existed a phenomenon where the supervisory officials and non-resident inspectors dispatched by the emperor to the localities would, over time, gradually morph into long-term resident high-ranking regional officials, eventually even forming independent warlord fiefdoms (割据) by the late stages of the empire.

Regarding this phenomenon, if one observes the explanations provided by Chinese scholars over the years, a highly farcical point emerges: almost everyone, standing from the perspective of the emperor and the court, views this as a "historical counter-current" (历史逆流) that should not have happened. They lament that these regional grandees usurped the court's authority.

They are clearly not the emperor but merely slaves (奴才), yet upon seeing the "imperial discipline faltering" (皇纲不振), they suffer more than if they were being killed! It is indeed the truest portrayal of the old Chinese saying: *"The emperor is not anxious, but the eunuchs are panicking"* (皇帝不急太监急).

I have never seen a single scholar initially suspect whether this bureaucratic centralized system itself was fundamentally flawed. Could it be that under the restored **bureaucratic system**, the court's draconian control and extraction of the localities was itself an economically highly inefficient and irrational system?

The court utilized circulating officials (*Liuguan* / 流官) who neither wanted to understand nor cared about local interests, sucking the marrow from the bones of commoners nationwide just to fatten one single family. Let alone how the wealth plundered and transported to the capital would be squandered, this very extraction itself was economically excruciatingly inefficient.

People should straightforwardly point out that in a ***feudal society*** dominated by feudal economic relations, a monistic political and economic entity should *never* have hyper-inflated to the scale of the Chinese Empire.

Localities possessing autonomy is not only rational but also represents historical justice *(meaning it aligns with the laws of historical development and is beneficial to social progress)*. Conversely, the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** itself is deeply reactionary (反动的).

As for non-resident officials morphing into resident high officials and even evolving into independent warlords in the late dynasty, this in itself was a "regression to the norm" (对常态的回归) of history. It is one thing for the emperor to feel heartbroken over it, but what exactly these handfuls of slaves are lamenting over is truly beyond comprehension!

Another issue that gives one a severe headache just listening to it is the so-called issue of establishing the capital—namely, why the capital of the Chinese Empire shifted from Chang'an and Luoyang to Beijing in the later periods.

If you carefully examine Chinese people's explanations for this issue, you will find that although they can list ten thousand benefits of moving the capital to Beijing, almost everyone's discourse is based on a single premise: that China *requires* a "massive capital" (大首都) capable of sustaining a centralized ***bureaucratic state***.

But why? Why must there be a massive capital that suppresses the entire nation? Whether now or in the ***Middle Ages***, regimes that opted for small capitals were not in the minority. Why must this possibility be ignored?

Take the most frequently mentioned defense against foreign threats, for example. It is true that the primary foreign enemies of the Chinese Empire during its last millennium clearly shifted toward the

northeast, but this absolutely does not mean the capital *had* to be pushed right up to the position of Beijing.

The very reason the capital of the ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** had to be established on the frontline against enemies, creating the situation of "the Son of Heaven guarding the nation's gate" (天子守国门), was because this regime inherently *had* to be built upon the extreme suppression of local power to prevent ***feudalization*** from reoccurring. Consequently, once the capital was far from the primary fortified borders, the empire could not possibly mount an effective response against foreign enemies. And if it forcefully tried to make an effective response, the An Lushan Rebellion and the Jingnan Campaign have already explicitly told posterity what the consequences would be.

However, for a genuinely **feudalized** regime, this was absolutely unnecessary. Because the subordinate ***feudal lords*** in the border regions could accomplish the task of defending against foreign threats within the framework of the feudal order. In the long run, these vassals would indeed grow powerful through continuous warfare, but that would be a prolonged process, providing the superior feudal rulers ample room for adjustment. They absolutely would not become uncontrollable within a mere one or two generations like China's frontier warlords or vassal princes.

In reality, aside from the fact that the despotic monarch had no choice but to personally guard his own front door, the primary reason for moving the capital to Beijing was that Beijing relied upon the North China Plain—the largest plain in China, fully developed and highly populated during the late imperial era *(China did not possess the Northeast/Manchuria at that time, so the Northeast Plain was naturally out of consideration)*. Within the capital region alone, there was a massively colossal amount of social wealth available for the capital to plunder.

Furthermore, Beijing and the Yangtze River's middle and lower reaches—which were increasingly becoming China's most economically developed and active regions—were both situated on the third geographical step of China's terrain. Once the original Sui-Tang Grand Canal was straightened, the capital of this **bureaucratic empire**—Beijing—could continuously devour the wealth of the Jiangnan region via water transport (漕运). Ever since ***the Central Plains*** regimes of the Song Dynasty abandoned Chang'an and Luoyang in favor of Kaifeng, this trend remained consistent.

Bluntly put, moving the capital to Beijing was nothing more than the despotic monarch choosing a location that was most convenient for exploiting the commoners of the entire realm, while simultaneously being forced to protect his own property.

That a bunch of Chinese people would actually try to find "rationality" in such a glaringly obvious atrocity—do they have some sort of Stockholm Syndrome? As slaves, they are terrified that their master cannot abuse them efficiently enough. When the master finds a better method to oppress them, they actually applaud and cheer, shouting "The Emperor is infinitely wise" (皇上圣明)!

Is there a second nation in the world this pathetic (贱)? To actually extract a sense of happiness, satisfaction, and superiority from being a slave—I now truly believe that Lu Xun's words were not empty at all.

Even more bizarre than this absurd "supremacism of superiors" (唯上主义) is that Chinese scholars and commoners are often addicted to issues that would *only* exist in China. They loudly cheer for the conspiracies and Machiavellian machinations (阴谋和权术) of emperors, officials, and concubines, as if they themselves, mere slaves, share in the glory.

These issues include, but are not limited to, palace struggles (宫斗), wars of succession (夺嫡), partisan strife (党争), and eunuch interference (宦官).

How many have earnestly pointed out how many innocent lives were lost, how much social wealth was incinerated, and how much destruction was inflicted upon social production by the infighting of the rulers under this bureaucratic system?

Suppose China had normally embarked upon the path of ***feudalization*** like Europe and Japan, becoming a normal class society of the ***feudal period***, devoid of a destructive bureaucratic system, possessing clear feudal inheritance laws, with lords of all ranks consolidating relationships through intermarriage—how on earth could those aforementioned perverse, unnatural issues possibly exist?

The fact is, **feudalized** Europe and Japan simply did not have this sheer abundance of rot that inflicted such colossal harm upon society.

This precisely echoes a popular saying on the Chinese internet: **"The problems the Chinese people or the Chinese government are most adept at 'solving' are exactly the problems that others never encounter at all, problems that were entirely spawned by themselves."**

Once a problem appears to be slightly alleviated *(though in reality, because these social problems were inherently spawned by the bureaucratic system, there is obviously zero possibility of ever solving them)*, this "governance capability" perversely becomes something worth boasting about, transforming into a symbol of the greatness of the leader and the superiority of the system.

Such is the tragedy of my country and my people.

7, The Chinese Rulers Have Mastered the Essentials of Lying

The title of this subsection seems highly contradictory to the one before the last. If the Chinese rulers have truly mastered the essentials of lying, then why are the lies they fabricate so clumsy?

Such a seemingly contradictory set of facts precisely reflects how "lying" should be conducted as a political behavior.

Apart from omission, using evasive language, and mixing falsehoods with truths—which are common methods of lying—a critical point we must pay special attention to is the distinction between group psychology and individual psychology.

Therefore, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, heavily emphasized one point: **if a government is to lie, it must tell a colossal lie (the "Big Lie" / 弥天大谎) rather than a small one.**

For an individual, a bizarrely outrageous lie paradoxically makes them feel it is "unlikely to be false." People tend to believe that no one would be audacious enough to fabricate such an absurd lie.

It is much like Emperor Gaozu of Han, Liu Bang. Clearly penniless, he dared to declare a gift of "ten thousand strings of cash" (贺钱万) at a banquet; the sum was simply so massive that people subconsciously refused to believe anyone would dare make such a joke.

Once the government applies this technique to society, the effect of the lie is magnified.

The rulers broadcast the lie through authoritative figures or institutions, which initially deceives a small batch of blind believers in the absence of evidence. Because they subconsciously recognize that the lie is outrageous, once people believe it, they tend to seek information that supports the lie while ignoring or denying contradictory information—this is what is commonly known as **"confirmation bias"** (确认偏误).

After completing this reinforcement of their own beliefs, those who believe the lie will attempt to persuade the people around them, in order to alleviate the anxiety brought about by their own subconscious doubts. Once many people believe a certain lie, an individual might choose to believe it under social pressure, even if they still harbor doubts internally.

After publicly stating their belief in a certain lie, out of consideration for maintaining their self-image—what the Chinese commonly refer to as **"face"** (面子 / *Mianzi*)—people are unwilling to admit they were deceived, even if they later learn the truth.

The famous piece *The Emperor's New Clothes* written by the Danish fairy-tale author Hans Christian Andersen is exactly about this phenomenon. Everyone felt that a supreme, infinitely

glorious king could not possibly be so stupid as to not realize he was wearing no clothes; therefore, everyone vied to praise the beauty of a garment that simply did not exist.

Yet, the one who finally punctured this lie was a child, because a child cares nothing for "face"; he had not yet reached the age of possessing the self-awareness of *Mianzi*.

China's history directly proves the greatness of Mr. Andersen using a realistic, incredibly prolonged, and widespread example. The fact is, such a fairy tale can absolutely happen in reality, and the civilization involved accounted for roughly one-fourth of the world's population and total economic output throughout historical periods.

How did the Chinese Empire manage to persistently deceive its own subjects and foreign observers for so long? It is nothing more than its history being too ancient and its mass being too colossal. With a bit of dressing up, if we were to tell a foreigner without any explanation: *"This so-called Celestial Empire (*天朝上国*) has actually long been a walking corpse (*行尸走肉*),"* that foreigner would also find it extremely difficult to believe.

Whenever the viewpoints held by Chinese officialdom and its ideology are overly bizarre, people paradoxically start wondering if they might actually be true. *Would a country that appears so powerful and has enjoyed such historical prestige really engage in such deception?* This mentality is exactly the same as the psychology of the king's subjects viewing the naked king in *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

If one were to tell an ordinary lie instead of a colossal one, the probability of being seen through might actually be higher. Because it is almost impossible to avoid lying over the course of a human life, the vast majority of people are very familiar with small lies, and possess excellent intuition regarding things they understand relatively well.

Goebbels's so-called "telling a Big Lie" is, to a certain extent, meant to preemptively overwhelm and destroy the rational thinking of the populace.

The second trick to lying lies in never attempting to cover up or justify the lie, especially when lying to the entire society.

Any lie, regardless of its magnitude or malignancy, is inherently a narrative contrary to reality. Speaking from an abstract perspective, according to the principles of physics, the complete information of a system—even after undergoing complex transformations—still exists in some form within the universe. Therefore, a lie can never be perfectly covered up. Masking a lie requires even more lies, which inevitably leads to an ever-increasing number of flaws.

Simultaneously, if the liar is already contemplating how to cover their tracks while telling the lie, it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to overwhelm the audience with sheer momentum and audacity.

The Book of Lord Shang (《商君书》) astutely pointed this out two thousand years ago: the court has no business acting like a thief for a thousand days. The ruler must not be a stealthy thief or swindler who steals the state; rather, he must directly become a thug (暴徒). What he needs to do is not politely deceive the people to gain their trust, but **directly violate the minds of the people; he must not merely coax the people into his trap, but directly hijack them onto his doomed pirate ship (**绑架到贼船上**).**

Thus, when lying, one must never consider the consequences. What the ruler should do is ensure the lie is massive enough to sustain a single, colossal execution of evil deeds, rather than worrying about how to continue the deception afterward. As long as a single, decisive deception achieves his political objectives, it is sufficient to render those who were duped entirely incapable of backing out, regardless of their reasons.

Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire during World War II serve as excellent examples. Up until the Allied forces breached the German homeland, the Nazi regime was still executing deserters via military tribunals. Even days before suffering the atomic bombings, the Japanese were still preparing for the *"Glorious Shattering of the Hundred Million"* (一亿玉碎 / *Ichioku Gyokusai*).

How could the over one hundred million commoners of Germany and Japan all be fools? No matter how many enemy personnel and equipment the battle reports claimed to have annihilated, could they possibly be oblivious when the flames of war burned their own homeland? Could the bombs raining from the sky be fake?

But by this point, even if the German and Japanese commoners knew they had been duped, there was absolutely nothing they could do.

This is exactly the objective rulers aim for when committing atrocities. Initially, when the people discovered they were deceived by the government, they might have refused to admit it merely out of social pressure and concern for their own "face" (脸面). By the time they were completely unable to deceive themselves any longer, they discovered they could no longer jump ship. **Now, the entire state and nation had to be buried alongside the ruler and the evil system he relied upon.**

Thus, the reader should be able to roughly understand why I stated *both* that the Chinese rulers have mastered the essentials of lying, and that their lies are often extremely clumsy. Far from being contradictory, this is entirely logical.

It is precisely because the Chinese rulers have, historically, almost completely deceived both domestic and foreign people and scholars through an astonishing distortion of historical narratives, that they can *now* maintain their rule using merely low-cost, exceptionally clumsy lies. This is a profoundly sorrowful reality.

If the reader still finds this difficult to believe, they need only continue reading. By the time they finish reviewing the entirety of this manuscript, clarity will naturally dawn upon their minds.

At the very end of this subsection, I must also point out that although the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** is sometimes exceedingly clumsy in fabricating historical lies, it is indeed highly adept at "civilizing and indoctrinating" (教化) the populace.

If readers pay attention to Chinese social public opinion, they will know that in recent years, a "Hanfu fever" (汉服热 / the craze for traditional Han Chinese clothing) has swept across various regions of China. This has concurrently driven a surge in popularity for traditional Han Chinese weddings, characterized primarily by traditional Han attire.

Readers will immediately realize that in the late stages of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state***, weddings—as a crucial life ceremony—had already become a vital occasion for instilling the ideology of the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会).

For example, among all major civilizations worldwide, only the Chinese refer to the groom as *"Xin Lang Guan"* (新郎官 / bridegroom-official). Foreigners find it almost impossible to imagine: *a wedding is just a wedding; what on earth does it have to do with becoming an official?*

However, in a place where the bureaucratic system utterly determines the allocation of power and social resources, getting promoted to an official rank is practically the highest blessing one can bestow—otherwise, one would have to wish someone to become the emperor, which is an utterance of "heinous treason" (大逆不道).

Traditional Han wedding attire fully reflects this ideology. Up until the Ming Dynasty, provided they had the means, the groom would wear official robes (官服) as his wedding attire, while the bride was permitted to use the ceremonial dress of a titled noblewoman (诰命 / *Gaoming*).

However, it is glaringly obvious that traditional Han wedding attire was not like this in the beginning. The evolution of wedding attire precisely mirrors the progression of China's historical trajectory.

In classical China during the Qin and Han periods, issues such as how wedding garments and the couple's hairstyles should be handled merely served to indicate one point: that both spouses had reached adulthood and were fully capable of shouldering the responsibility of starting a family.

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, because the bureaucratic system had already become highly formidable, the Eastern Han Confucian scholar Zheng Xuan (郑玄), when annotating the *Book of Rites* (《仪礼》), first proposed the concept of **"Shesheng"** (摄盛 / ritual usurpation or temporary elevation of status). This meant that the bride and groom could adopt ceremonial systems slightly "overstepping" (僭越) their status during the wedding. Yet, the ceremonial systems reflected here were precisely the bureaucratic hierarchies.

When Eastern Han Confucianism attempted to "unify the Three Orthodoxies" (通三统), they habitually employed a specific trick: equating the aristocratic hierarchical system of the ***early states*** in the pre-Qin era with the bureaucratic hierarchical system post-mid-Western Han, thereby substituting concepts on the sly. Eastern Han Confucian scholars naturally knew exactly how vastly different pre-Qin society was from the era they currently inhabited, but the increasingly dominant role of the bureaucratic system over society made this adaptive "re-interpretation movement" inevitable.

Between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD—the period with the highest ***degree of feudalization*** in China—**"Shesheng"** was suppressed. This carried a certain inevitability. Although the ***landlord class*** did not successfully transform into ***feudal lords***, a strict system of family pedigree (门第制度) was nevertheless formed during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties; various forms of usurpation or overstepping were unacceptable.

After the bureaucratic system was restored in the Tang Dynasty, "Shesheng" rapidly returned to Chinese society, and male wedding attire was, for the first time, explicitly linked with official robes. By the Song Dynasty, as the imperial examination system expanded, male weddings became further associated with passing the civil service exams. In fact, the term *"Xin Lang Guan"* originally referred exclusively to those who had successfully passed the exams.

During the Ming and Qing periods, the system of *Shesheng* in weddings fully matured and was oriented toward the entire society. Of course, within China's ***restoration-bureaucratic society***, *Shesheng* did not only appear in weddings but permeated a vast array of ceremonial systems.

Now, readers can naturally discern the "indoctrinating" significance of the male wearing official robes and the female wearing a phoenix coronet and robes of rank (凤冠霞帔) during the wedding.

Through the wedding ceremony, the ***restoration-bureaucratic society***—under the premise of ***absolute monarchical*** power—affirmed the power and status of the male patriarch within a patriarchal family (父权制家庭). Allowing the male to briefly don official robes during the wedding not only granted the individual an illusory sense of satisfaction but also forged a virtual relationship of conferral and acceptance. Because an official's power ultimately originates from the emperor, he ought to remain loyal to the emperor under any condition.

Every time a wedding ceremony is performed, it consolidates the ideology of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** within society one more time, compelling people to subconsciously submit to reality.

By affirming the legitimacy of young, strong males acquiring power within the family, the *restoration-bureaucratic system* satisfied their vanity, while simultaneously guiding them to redirect the abuse they suffered from outsiders onto their own family members.

As for the wife, although she occupied a subordinate position relative to her husband, she could play the role of the master relative to the concubines. Simultaneously, female patriarchs wielded considerable despotic power over their children.

It is exactly through the prolonged domestication (驯化) of the people via various commonplace ceremonies that China's ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** established a rigorous hierarchical order and ideology, ultimately creating a **mutually-harming hell** (人人互害的地狱) where everyone preys upon everyone else.

Readers might not be able to profoundly empathize with this point, but for a Chinese person like me, who grew up in a typical Chinese-style family, these words are truly written in blood and tears (字字泣血).

One matter that evokes profound reflection in me is that Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, was actually a **"revolutionary pessimist"**—a reality starkly contrary to the perception of the vast majority.

On the mainland Chinese internet, the pro-establishment camp (建制派) often derides Chiang Kai-shek as the "Island Raider" (海岛奇兵), for he was undeniably the loser in the struggle for national state power.

However, in the more than two decades following 1949, it was precisely Chiang's opponent who repeatedly revealed the underlying thought: *"I will ultimately be crushed by the torrent of the times."*

This is corroborated by his own *Selected Works*, his chronological biographies, his annotations on the *Zizhi Tongjian* (Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance) and the *Twenty-Four Histories* (二十四史), as well as his commentaries on Chinese historical figures. A significant portion of these materials originates from the Institute of Party History and Literature of the CPC Central Committee and its predecessor departments; therefore, even the Chinese officialdom acknowledges this.

When commenting on Chinese history, Mao himself frequently adopted a **"Southern Dynasties-centric perspective"** (南朝本位). That is to say, he invariably utilized a specific historical analogy (比附), viewing himself as the *Jiangzuo* regimes (江左政权 / the regimes situated east of the Yangtze River) in Chinese history.

If one opens the records of his public evaluations of historical figures and his reading annotations, it becomes glaringly obvious that Mao harbored an extraordinary affinity for the six *Jiangzuo* regimes —Eastern Wu, Eastern Jin, Liu Song, Southern Qi, Liang, and Chen—as well as the later Southern Song Dynasty.

Taking the Northern and Southern Dynasties period as an example, the currently verifiable number of Mao's evaluations and annotations regarding figures from the Southern Dynasties is nearly ten times that of figures from the Northern Dynasties. Within the *Twenty-Four Histories*, the volume of Mao's annotations on the *History of the Southern Dynasties* (《南史》) is second only to the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (《三国志》) and the *Old and New Books of Tang* (新旧唐书), comparable to the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》), and greater than the *Book of Han* (《汉书》) and the *Book of the Later Han* (《后汉书》).

Not only did he delight in evaluating figures from the Southern Dynasties, but his appraisals were significantly higher than the general consensus held by historical academia and the public.

Taking the Three Kingdoms period as an example, the general historical evaluation among the Chinese public places Shu Han above Cao Wei, and Cao Wei above Sun Wu (Eastern Wu). Out of his appreciation for Cao Cao's military strategy and literary talent, Mao substantially elevated his evaluation of Cao Wei. However, among the three kingdoms, his assessment diverged most drastically from general public opinion regarding Sun Wu.

Mao made no secret of his fondness for the *Jiangzuo* figures during the transition between the late Han and the Three Kingdoms. Sun Quan, Zhou Yu, Lu Su, Lu Xun, and even Lü Meng—who was disliked by the general public—all received exceptionally high praise from him.

Conversely, Guan Yu, who was killed by Eastern Wu, was given a very low evaluation by Mao. Even when discussing related historical figures, Mao never forgot to criticize Guan Yu's arrogance, pointing out that his elevated historical status was merely the beneficiary of the advocacy of the **feudal ethical code** (封建礼教). Regarding other historical figures of Shu Han, Mao's evaluations were also lower than the public average.

Following the founding of the state, he repeatedly demanded that leading cadres master a certain level of cultural knowledge. Lü Meng of Sun Wu and Cao Jingzong from the transition between Qi and Liang were established as typical models; additionally, Zhou Yu and Wei Rui were also regarded as exemplars for leading cadres to emulate.

Viewed in this light, Mao's attitude appears to be a bewildering anomaly (咄咄怪事). Why would this be the case? In fact, we can find the answer in his profound affection for the works of patriotic *Ci* (词) poets of the Southern Song Dynasty, represented by Xin Qiji and Chen Liang.

During the Southern Song period, because ***the Central Plains*** (中原) had already been occupied by the Jin Dynasty and the Song was in a diplomatically inferior position, patriotic intellectuals frequently analogized their current situation to the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. Through literary works, they extolled the monarchs and ministers who aggressively pushed for Northern Expeditions, while fiercely critiquing those who sought only a momentary, ignoble peace (苟求偏安).

When appreciating these Song *Ci* poems, **Mao engaged in an "analogy of an analogy" (**比附之比附**). He identified himself as the historical Southern Dynasties, mounting a helpless, desperate resistance against an unstoppable offensive from the North.**

This is precisely why Mao exhibited an extraordinary partiality for illustrious Southern Dynasties generals like Chen Qingzhi, while giving low appraisals to, or even completely ignoring, the outstanding military commanders and unifiers who campaigned in the North.

In truth, observing from the perspective of long-term historical evolution today, the abilities, morals, and achievements of the monarchs and ministers of both the North and the South were utterly mediocre (不过尔尔). After all, if Chinese history truly possessed so many heroic elites, how could it have degenerated to its current state?

Mao's personal historical worldview diverged drastically from widespread public opinion in some areas, yet aligned highly in others; the discrepancy frequently hinged entirely upon whether the historical figures served the *Jiangzuo* regimes.

Take Guan Yu and Yue Fei as examples. Both are historical figures who enjoy immense prestige among the populace, are beloved by the rulers of the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家), have been heavily romanticized by literary works, and have had their military records significantly exaggerated.

While Mao manifestly disparaged Guan Yu on one hand, he simultaneously extolled Yue Fei in a fairly traditional manner on the other. When evaluating the biography of Du Mu in the *New Book of Tang*, he once again expounded on his view of Xiang Yu through Du Mu's poetry, affirming that Xiang Yu was an outstanding hero, and arguing that he should have retreated into Jiangdong (江东) to persist in the struggle rather than committing suicide.

It was precisely based on this historical analogy that Mao resonated so profoundly with Xin Qiji and Chen Liang, which likely influenced some of his foreign policies.

Since the Southern Dynasties were the side destined to be crushed by history, they should at least *"rely on the cross-flowing river and the continuous hills on three sides to strike a posture of contending for hegemony"* (一水横陈，三面连岗，做出争雄势). They needed to adopt the posture of a "Northern Expedition" (北伐) to increase buffer zones and delay the arrival of Doomsday.

In reality, the "export of revolution" (输出革命) and the international communist movements he fervently advocated were, to a large extent, a "Northern Expedition" based on exactly this mindset.

He absolutely did not genuinely believe that the situation was overwhelmingly excellent or that the *"East Wind had truly prevailed over the West Wind."* Rather, he was doing everything possible to maximize his bargaining chips (讨价还价的筹码) against his primary adversaries, particularly the United States.

The fact is, he indeed achieved his objective. Those left-wing students in Japan, France, and other countries—incited by fanatical emotions—were reduced to mere monkeys pulling chestnuts from the fire for someone else. Many of them were utterly dumbfounded and devastated when they heard of Nixon's visit to China.

By the mid-20th century, Taiwan had only been incorporated into China's territory for three centuries. According to China's traditional "worldview of All Under Heaven" (天下观), Mao had undoubtedly already acquired orthodox legitimacy (正统地位). Thus, when he analogized himself to the Southern Dynasties, he was evidently doing so on a global scale.

But did he view a specific imaginary enemy as the "Northern Dynasties"? If so, who exactly was this "Northern Dynasty"?

A universally recognized, successful conqueror of state power remained perpetually plagued by anxiety and dread (惶惶不安), believing that his enterprise would ultimately come to nothing. This was not a phenomenon that merely emerged in the final decade of his life; such tendencies were already present at least as early as the Xibaipo period. How can this be considered anything but a tragicomedy of history?

As for the image of the heroic figure brimming with "revolutionary optimism" in our country's official discourse, there is almost no need for refutation.

Because the official justifications often rely on certain poems and lyric verses (诗词歌赋). However, anyone with basic cultural literacy knows that a literary genre like poetry can absolutely not serve as the basis for judging an author's worldview and long-term emotional disposition.

Obviously, a poet of the Graceful and Restrained school (婉约派) can compose verses more heroic than those of the Heroic and Abandoned school (豪放派), and an acknowledged poet of the Heroic school can likewise produce works more delicate than those of the Graceful school. Anyone who has undergone compulsory education knows this.

Compared to genres like poetry, which express short-term emotional impulses, full-length novels and epic narrative poems can accurately reflect the author's actual worldview and historical perspective. I believe it is impossible for anyone who has read a certain amount of literature not to understand this principle.

On today's internet, using a few pages from a historical figure's diary or one or two poems to adjudge that figure's political inclinations and fundamental views of the world is a quintessential logical fallacy.

8, The Views of My Friends

Realizing all this on the eve of the New Year, I was doomed to a joyless holiday season. What deeply grieves me the most is the realization that by the time I was born, my motherland had already been dead.

Someone who does not understand Chinese society might find it impossible to imagine my life. If I had simply been a heartless or oblivious person, it would have been fine. But in reality, the very reason I involuntarily ponder the past and future of my country during my free time—and even delve into the histories of other major nations to do so—is fundamentally because I harbor a

profound affection for my country and my compatriots. I have always believed that our nation could be better, and that the Chinese people deserve to live happier lives.

For a mathematics student like myself, engaging in such reflections and writing down these words brings me no honor whatsoever; on the contrary, it may invite endless mockery and danger. Aside from a few close friends who have consistently expressed their trust in me, my family has never been sparing in their mockery and relentless belittlement. Yet, I persevered in this exploration. What sustained me was nothing more than my love for China (though, of course, the country and the government are two entirely different things) and my pursuit of truth.

But now I know that China has gone too far and too late down a dead end. Short of being utterly shattered and undergoing a complete reconstruction, where is the opportunity to turn back and return to the righteous path? One thousand four hundred years is such a vast expanse of time. When the 18th Dynasty of Egypt triumphantly expelled the Hyksos and expanded Egypt's borders to unprecedented lands, could anyone have imagined that 1,400 years later, even the death of the ancient Egyptian civilization would have entered its countdown? Living in this era, we are exactly like the citizens of Constantinople in the year 1400—what is there left to be done? It is precisely this irretrievable situation that fills me with sorrow.

After I returned to Xi'an, aside from H, who was the first to know, my friends A, F, S, G, and Z were also informed of this.

H was as open-minded and philosophical as ever. After all, this guy had long ceased to believe the government's official propaganda. Over the past two years, we had hiked together many times through the impoverished backwaters southwest of Beijing. Even without theoretical support, what we had seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears had already given us a considerable understanding of China's current reality. Both H and I had already been somewhat mentally prepared when we learned the truth. It was merely because I had poured so much heart and soul into this endeavor that I inevitably felt depressed.

H expressed an attitude of "after us, the deluge." Ultimately, China's descent to this point is purely of its own making. Letting the doomed perish and the viable live on is simply the law of nature; why mourn for those destined to fall?

A appears somewhat nerdy but is actually exceptionally brilliant. He is also a mathematics major. When I told him about my discoveries, his first reaction was sheer astonishment. In A's own words, having spent these past few years in university—more than half of which were under pandemic lockdowns—and having surfed the internet, especially the global internet, for so long, how could one possibly not sense the rise and fall of the world around us? Only today, after being informed by me, did he finally fully understand the causes and consequences. His own intuitions had been validated. Although, as a Chinese person, he certainly couldn't be happy about it, he simultaneously felt a kind of "so that's how it is" intellectual joy. I suppose this is a lifestyle unique to mathematics students!

F, S, and G are all my high school classmates. Their initial reactions were identical: after listening, they fell into silence, then stated they had no way to refute it and believed it to be true, followed by ceaseless sighing. F mentioned that he had just joined the Party. After learning the truth, he felt terrified and decided that from now on, he would remain an entirely "transparent person" (invisible), resolutely refusing to do anything harmful to the masses. Once the "world undergoes a drastic change" (天下有变), he would immediately detach himself and cut all ties, refusing to be a sinner of history.

S was much more action-oriented. After pondering for a month or two, he sought me out and said he had decided to emigrate to Canada as soon as possible and had already prepared a plan, quoting the old proverb: "A gentleman does not stand under a collapsing wall." As for G, we haven't met recently, so I am not entirely clear on his further thoughts.

Z is a classmate from Shandong whom I met at the Beijing Institute of Technology. He is steadfastly walking the path of officialdom—the career most coveted by Shandong natives. He joined the Party in his sophomore year, and by the time we parted ways in our senior year, he was already confirmed to become a *Xuandiaosheng* (选调生 / a fast-tracked civil servant). I still remember when we were chatting on the empty roads of the South Campus, and I told him all of this. After listening, Z said nothing, but his expression betrayed profound inner agony. After a long while, he finally asked: "In your deduction... is it possible that there are some errors?"

But after asking this, he fell silent again. I knew that Z's academic performance was quite excellent; at least up to the undergraduate level, he had received rigorous scientific training. Deep down, he knew very well that he could not find any logical contradictions. Before parting, he could only express the hope that I would observe the historical developmental paths of a few more countries to see if there was any room for revision. However, deep down, we both knew that this was practically impossible.

Nevertheless, when the Spring Festival concluded, the immediate necessity to tackle my graduation thesis and defense provided me with a temporary sense of relief. During that period, I simply didn't have much time to dwell on those agonizing realities.

Chapter 7: Military Pressure and Water Conservancy Issues in the Restoration-Bureaucratic Period

This section serves as a supplementary discourse aimed at filling a logical gap left in the preceding text. While reviewing my earlier deductions, I noticed an issue: I previously pointed out that the immense military pressure exerted by the Xiongnu during the Western Han Dynasty forced the Han Empire to react drastically, which became the primary catalyst causing Imperial China to form an extremely powerful bureaucratic system during a premature ***classical period***.

This inevitably raises a question: since the intense pressure from the North catalyzed the premature bureaucratic system, and it is widely known that after the ethnic minorities' ***Ru Guan*** (***Entering the Pass*** / 入关) concluded during the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern and Southern Dynasties and China entered the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (官僚复辟时期), the military threat from the North (especially the newly rising Northeast region) not only persisted, but instances of minority ***Ru Guan*** even became more frequent. Could it be possible, then, that such sustained external military pressure not only initially forged the premature bureaucratic system but also, after the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process was interrupted, served as the fundamental reason for the long-term maintenance of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制)?

In fact, relying on my personal reading and life experience, my intuition is sufficient to categorically reject such a hypothesis, which is exactly why I subconsciously did not regard it as an issue in my previous writings. However, academic argumentation obviously cannot rely merely on "personal intuition." In the following text, I will conduct a rigorous demonstration from three dimensions to thoroughly refute this possibility.

1, The Threat of the Xiongnu Was Indeed Unique in Chinese History

The first aspect: the pressure—especially the psychological pressure—brought upon China by the Xiongnu at their zenith was overwhelmingly massive compared to other formidable enemies that later appeared in northern China.

That is to say, even though China's close proximity to the Mongolian Plateau meant it would continuously suffer unimaginable military pressure from nomadic tribes originating there until the Qing Dynasty pacified Mongolia, the oppression and deterrence the Xiongnu inflicted upon the contemporaneous Chinese regime still possessed a marked uniqueness among all the various Mongolian-plateau regimes.

First, setting aside the psychological heavy pressure brought by the Xiongnu, as the first nomadic empire, upon the newborn Han Empire under specific circumstances. Judging merely from the balance of power recorded in historical materials, the only regime capable of posing a military

threat to China comparable to the Xiongnu was the Mongol Empire after Genghis Khan's unification.

The fact is, even when Genghis Khan had just unified Mongolia and the Mongolian regime was rising like the morning sun, the military force it could mobilize was no more than a hundred thousand. By contrast, even during the 20 years following their catastrophic strategic defeat in the Battle of Mobei, the Xiongnu could still maintain a combat force of that size.

People easily judge the relative strength of the Xiongnu Empire and the Mongol Empire by their successes and failures in their conquests. However, a point I believe must be particularly emphasized is this: **the very reason the Mongol Empire could become powerful enough to conquer the largest contiguous territory possessed by any regime in human history *(roughly matching the British Empire at its zenith)* was, in itself, the result of China being severely weakened by the bureaucratic system.**

What people should not forget is that in 1214 AD—five years before the start of the first Mongol campaign against the West—Emperor Xuanzong of Jin abandoned the central capital of Beijing out of fear of the Mongols and fled to Kaifeng. Early the following year, the Mongols swiftly captured Beijing, and by 1219, most of Hebei and half of Shanxi were already in their possession.

By the start of the second western campaign in 1235, Western Xia and the Jin Dynasty had successively perished, and half of China was already under Mongol rule. By the start of the third western campaign in 1253–1254, the Mongols had not only subdued the Tibetan Plateau but also completed the strategic encirclement of the Song Dynasty by annihilating Dali and forcing the southwestern ***barbarian*** tribes to submit.

These facts fully demonstrate that during the Mongol Empire's conquest of the West, it had obviously become vastly different from a mere nomadic empire. **The Mongols could extract manpower and material resources from the conquered parts of China to serve distant wars. This itself was the consequence of China—especially northern China, where social atomization (社会原子化) was even more severe—being exceedingly easy to conquer.**

The situation faced by the Xiongnu was drastically different from that of the Mongols. The Han Dynasty resisted the Xiongnu's offensive so tenaciously that, although the Xiongnu could wildly expand around the periphery of the Han Dynasty, they were unable to occupy the fully developed territories of the ***Zhongyuan*** (***Central Plains*** / 中原) to stably extract revenues from them; they could only resort to plundering.

Subsequently, the Xiongnu Empire at its zenith was repelled by the overwhelming offensives of the Han army.

Secondly, the threat from the Xiongnu perceived psychologically by the Han people was further magnified by various factors, primarily reflected in the following five points.

First, as the first nomadic empire in human history *(as for the earlier Scythians, their historical records are pitifully scarce compared to the Xiongnu)*, the Xiongnu were an entirely novel adversary for the Han people.

Before the Han Dynasty, the Chinese had never imagined that a **production mode** (生产方式) based on nomadism could generate such a formidable regime. This meant the Han people lacked understanding of the Xiongnu to a considerable degree.

How was this adversary on the Mongolian Plateau politically organized? What were their military combat methods? What was the topography of the Mongolian heartland like? These questions were initially entirely alien to the Han people. It was only through decades of passive counterattacks that they slowly fumbled toward answers to some of these questions.

It was precisely upon the foundation of continuously understanding their arch-enemy that the Han Dynasty acquired the possibility of launching a strategic counter-offensive. Furthermore, it was the Han military decision-making echelon, headed by Emperor Wu of Han, that gradually groped out how to strategically strike, militarily engage, and diplomatically contain the nomadic regimes on the Mongolian Plateau to achieve the objective of encirclement and strangulation (包围绞杀) during their offensive campaigns against the Xiongnu.

For the Chinese empires subsequent to the Han Dynasty, this dread born of the unknown significantly dissipated. Mongolia was still Mongolia; whether concerning the geopolitical situation of northern China or the characteristics of the nomadic **production mode**, the changes that could occur over a millennium were extremely limited.

This meant that subsequent ***Zhongyuan*** regimes had a wealth of historical precedent to reference. When facing newly emerging nomadic empires on the Mongolian Plateau, they were no longer completely in the dark (两眼一抹黑); consequently, when confronting such threats, they lacked the acute tension experienced by the Han people.

Second, the expectations regarding the balance of power when confronting northern ethnic minority threats in later generations differed markedly from the early Han Dynasty's perception of the Xiongnu.

When the Han Dynasty was newly established, it was merely a "local regime" *(relative to the entirety of Eurasia)* isolated in eastern Asia, separated from the main parts of the world by continuous plateaus. The Han people possessed an extreme lack of knowledge regarding the world

beyond their borders, precisely because these borders had only recently been formed *(as Huaxia expanded to those points)*.

Before Emperor Wu of Han, although sporadic, grassroots long-distance trade had long existed, there was genuinely no external corridor capable of facilitating official diplomacy and massive commodity exchange.

Contrasting with this ignorance of the outside world, the Han people could simultaneously and distinctly sense that within the span of two or three generations, the Xiongnu had engaged in massive external expansion, exerting increasingly widespread and formidable military pressure along the entire border of the Han Dynasty.

The very fact that Zhang Qian was dispatched to the Western Regions to contact the Dayuezhi (大月氏)—an ally whose attitude and even location were unclear—demonstrated the Han imperial high command's terror regarding this disadvantageous situation.

The Han Dynasty's economic growth was approaching its limits, yet the Xiongnu's steady expansion over the past decades was still continuing, and the Han people fundamentally could not judge where the limits of Xiongnu expansion lay. This inevitably led contemporaries to realize: **The later the war breaks out, the more disadvantageous the situation will be for us.** Consequently, the tension permeating the entire society intensified.

As China's external communication corridors were completely blasted open by the military during the Han Dynasty, and as the entire Eurasian continent—especially the ***Eurasian Steppe*** and the irrigated agricultural zones of ***Central Asia***—was no longer as vast and empty as it was in the 2nd century BC, coupled with the Chinese people's growing familiarity with the characteristics of nomadic ethnic groups, the Chinese empires post-Han found it exceedingly difficult to feel anxious over the potentially boundless growth of nomadic power.

In fact, although Chinese dynasties were subject to the historical 的 **dynastic cycle** (历史周期率 / 王朝周期律) due to the existence of the bureaucratic system, the nomadic **production mode** and the climate of the Mongolian Plateau were, in any case, even more unstable.

Thus, from the perspective of the Chinese empires, in most situations, as long as they firmly held their ground for a period of time, once the exceptionally talented Khan of the nomadic empire died, the nomads would often descend into division themselves, either declining to the point of being unable to pose a threat or migrating westward away from China. Judging from the historical facts of the Xianbei (Eastern Han), the Göktürks (突厥), the Uyghurs (回纥), and the Mongols (Ming Dynasty), this viewpoint is undeniably justified.

Third, another psychological consequence caused by the isolation stemming from the lack of external corridors was that, prior to Emperor Wu's counter-offensive, the Han people experienced an intense sense of encirclement and isolation.

The situation facing the Han people was not merely being suppressed by the Xiongnu in the north. The Qiang (羌) in the northwest, the local regimes in the southwest, Nanyue (南越) in the south, Minyue (闽越) in the southeast, and Gojoseon (朝鲜) in the northeast all constituted an encirclement against the Han from their perspective.

A direct consequence of this intense feeling of being absolutely isolated and unaided was the Han Empire's desperate yearning for reliable strategic allies. The fact I have repeatedly mentioned—Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions—is the most compelling proof of this.

When people today mention Emperor Wu of Han, they always overemphasize his "martial achievements" (武功). Netizens eagerly relish the various feats of Han envoys "flaunting imperial prestige in alien lands" (扬威异域), yet they frequently overlook Emperor Wu's exceptionally brilliant diplomatic enterprise.

In reality, there were objective, unavoidable reasons why Han envoys appeared exceedingly insolent toward the small city-states in the Tarim Basin (南疆盆地). These city-states, built upon oases, were far too weak compared to massive powers like Han and the Xiongnu. They were already far from the areas under Xiongnu rule, and even further from the Han Dynasty.

Therefore, when facing the sudden appearance and overwhelming superiority of either the Xiongnu or Han armies, these city-states had no choice but to adopt the survival tactic of "submitting to whichever army arrives first."

Thus, when the Han Dynasty's administrative institutions in the Western Regions had not yet been established or were in decline, dispatching a handful of death-defying **"Cossacks bearing imperial tallies"** (持节哥萨克) to threaten these small states with potential military intervention and force them to align with Han was, obviously, the most cost-effective method.

However, toward diplomatic targets that possessed sufficient power to serve as long-term allies, we can clearly see that the empire's genuine foreign policy achieved astounding success.

Besides the alliance between the ***Zhongyuan*** regimes and the Donghu (Xianbei and Wuhuan) in the northeast mentioned earlier, the Han Dynasty also found a truly enduring ally in the distant northwest: the Kingdom of Wusun (乌孙).

Starting from Emperor Wu of Han, the friendship between the ***Zhongyuan*** dynasties and Wusun lasted for more than five centuries. Not only did Wusun consistently dispatch troops as an ally of the Han Dynasty in wars against the Xiongnu during the Western and Eastern Han periods, but even after the fall of the Han Dynasty, they continued to pay tribute to Cao Wei as before.

Up until the Northern Wei unified northern China in the 5th century AD, the State of Wusun still presented tribute to the ***Zhongyuan*** regime. When Northern Wei envoys traveled to the Western Regions and passed through Wusun in 437 AD, they were still received with courtesy by the King of Wusun. Around this time, Wusun gradually lost its independence due to strikes from the Rouran (柔然).

Since Emperor Wu began his foreign ventures among the "***barbarians*** of the four directions" (外事四夷), China's amicable relations with the Donghu and Wusun spanned roughly four to five centuries, and as China's allies, they indeed contributed immensely. In addition, up to the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, no small number of Western Region states still came to offer tribute *(regardless of whether to the Southern or Northern regimes)*.

Such prolonged strategic partnerships are not frequently seen even in the entirety of human history, and they are absolutely rare in Chinese history. Aside from the suzerain-vassal relationship (宗藩关系) between China and Joseon (***Korea***) during the Ming and Qing dynasties, there are no other examples. This alone is sufficient to demonstrate the magnitude of the diplomatic achievements during Emperor Wu's era.

And the very reason the Han Empire so meticulously cultivated diplomatic relations with these newly discovered friends—was it not largely born out of the crisis of previously feeling utterly isolated and unaided?

For the ***Zhongyuan*** dynasties following the Han, this suffocating threat of encirclement simply did not exist. Up until Tsarist Russia and Western European nations encroached upon China from two directions in the late Qing Dynasty, the enemies, at most, exerted pressure from the north; trade and communication via the southern maritime routes were never entirely severed.

For instance, even when Dali was annihilated by the Mongols and the Southern Song found itself in a posture of being encircled on land, it did not stop the Maritime Trade Supervisorates (市舶司) from continuing to function as usual.

When the Tang Dynasty faced the military threat of the Tibetan Empire (吐蕃), it could easily contact several allies around Tibet to contain it.

Even when the Southern Ming was resisting in its final stages, Koxinga (郑成功) was still attempting to seek reinforcements from Japan, and the Yongli Emperor simply converted to Catholicism, pinning his hopes on the Pope's Crusaders.

Placed in the early Han period, China did not even possess such a hope of relying on an ally for assistance.

An interesting anecdote is that one of the daily tasks of the Daoist alchemists and sorcerers (方士) recruited into the palace by Emperor Wu was to curse the Xiongnu using various magics. The immense pressure borne by the decision-makers of the Han Dynasty is easily imaginable.

Fourth, the lack of "strategic depth" (战略纵深) was another massive difference between the Han Empire facing the Xiongnu prior to Emperor Wu's counter-offensive, and later generations facing northern threats.

Because at that time, the vast regions of the South were either not in Han hands or simply remained undeveloped; they could hardly even be considered part of Huaxia, but were merely the "conquered Baiyue regions" (百越地区).

Therefore, there is a colossal discrepancy between how the Han people perceived the Xiongnu military threat, and how subsequent Chinese regimes viewed northern threats. The latter, having passed through the Eastern Jin, the Sixteen Kingdoms, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, possessed increasingly rich "experience in fleeing southward" (南渡经验), and the South was indeed becoming increasingly developed, its economy booming and eventually surpassing the North.

In the eyes of the Han people, the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River Basin constituted, both economically and culturally, virtually the entirety of China. Although the Huai-Si River Basin (淮泗流域) was developing fairly well, it was fundamentally unsuited for large-scale warfare. Thus, in the eyes of the Han people, the strategic depth they possessed against the cavalry-dominated forces of the Xiongnu was pathetically shallow. Once the middle and lower Yellow River fell, it equated to the annihilation of the state.

What forces a person pushed to the brink to suddenly erupt in violent resistance is the severing of all avenues of survival, leaving them with absolutely nowhere to retreat. Is this not exactly the same for a nation?

It was precisely because the various strata of the early Han Empire perceived absolutely no route of retreat when facing the Xiongnu—who were applying pressure across thousands of kilometers of

borderlines—that the entire society was far more prone to generating a mindset of staking everything on a single throw to immediately conduct a grand decisive battle (孤注一掷立刻进行大决战).

When we look back at history, it is not difficult to discern that because Emperor Wu of Han himself grew up and matured in this very atmosphere, he possessed an almost superhuman obsession with strategic decisive battles throughout his life.

Even when the Xiongnu had fled far away, and the frontlines were pushed so distant that strangling the Xiongnu via large-scale fortified zones would likely have been more efficient than main-force pitched battles (主力会战), he still repeatedly dispatched massive armies to conduct "trans-Gobi campaigns" (度幕作战 / crossing the Mongolian Gobi to fight). This resulted in the Han army suffering repeated defeats in these pitched battles. It was not until Li Guangli surrendered to the Xiongnu that Emperor Wu finally acknowledged his grave errors in military deployment through the *Edict of Luntai* (《轮台诏》).

For the Chinese regimes of the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, however, "fleeing to the South" (向南逃跑) was an entirely normal option, ready to be placed on the table for discussion. Although a regime content with temporary, ignoble peace in the South (偏安南方) would fearfully still be annihilated eventually, that would at least be several generations later.

Even at the end of the Ming Dynasty, before Emperor Chongzhen hanged himself, he discussed the issue of fleeing South (南迁) with his ministers on several occasions. It was only due to his personal character flaws, and the fact that peasant rebel activities had made ***the Central Plains*** unsafe, that ultimately neither the emperor nor the crown prince managed to make the journey.

Chinese history is replete with such examples: psychologically, they always felt there was a route of retreat; if they could not hold the line, they had somewhere else to run, right up until they reached a literal dead end. The mindset of proactive counter-offensive and resolute struggle exhibited by the Han people when facing a formidable threat is simply incomparable to that of subsequent dynasties.

Fifth is the issue of self-confidence.

The Han Empire's successful defeat of the Xiongnu itself provided a powerful psychological suggestion to the nascent Han ethnic identity. Simultaneously, the large-scale conquests conducted during Emperor Wu's era meant that the known world *(more accurately, the geographical regions*

that possessed significant mutual interaction with China) no longer harbored any adversary capable of rivaling the Chinese Empire. The tributary system (朝贡体系) was thus fully established.

The consequence of this phenomenon was that the ***Zhongyuan*** dynasties developed an intense sense of superiority toward the surrounding "***barbarian regimes***" (蛮夷政权). Subjectively, they constantly disparaged the latter; far from overestimating them, they frequently underestimated their military threats.

If we look at the history of the Southern Ming, we can find that this arrogance frequently reached a level of sheer absurdity. After the Qing army defeated the peasant rebels and entered Beijing, and the Shunzhi Emperor ascended the throne there for the second time, many intellectuals across the vast southern regions—who still formally remained loyal to the Southern Ming *(though not necessarily to the same monarch)*—genuinely believed that as long as they raised local militia forces (团练武装) in their hometowns to launch a Northern Expedition, the Manchus would be effortlessly repelled.

In their eyes, the combat capability of the Eight Banners army (八旗军队) was on the same level as the peasant rebels—which was already utterly ludicrous.

Such a frivolous and arrogant attitude was something the Han Dynasty did not dare to adopt when facing the Xiongnu. True, both sides attempted to gain the upper hand in diplomatic rhetoric, and the Han officialdom naturally denounced the Xiongnu as ***barbarians***. However, the two nations still had to maintain diplomacy based on hard power. Before Emperor Wu decided to counterattack, the Han Dynasty was distinctly the weaker party.

There is a glaring piece of evidence illustrating the Han Empire's regard and respect for an adversary like the Xiongnu: **In the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》) written by Sima Qian, it is explicitly stated that the Xiongnu were the descendants of the royal house of the Xia Dynasty—the very first dynasty in Chinese history.** This account was subsequently inherited by the *Book of Han* (《汉书》).

Comparing this treatment to the incredibly sloppy commentaries in later Chinese historical documents *(excluding, of course, those written by regimes established by ethnic minorities regarding their own origins)*—which casually claimed various ethnic minorities "*originated from mixed barbarian stock*" (源于杂胡)—the difference is like heaven and earth.

Although we cannot rule out the possibility that Sima Qian wrote this to fulfill the political necessity of "unifying the Three Orthodoxies" (通三统) at the time, directly tracing the origins of

the Xiongnu back to the Xia Dynasty and claiming the nation's arch-enemy shared common ancestors with themselves is, in itself, an act of colossal respect toward that arch-enemy. *(Regardless of where the Xia Dynasty specifically was or how long it existed, judging by its vital position in Chinese historical literature, the bloodline of the Xia people had long since melded into the Han ethnicity).*

2, The Restoration-Bureaucratic System Was Fundamentally Incapable of Coping with the Military Realities of the Feudal Period

The second aspect: times change. The Chinese society of the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** had undergone colossal changes compared to the Western Han period. Believing that the military pressure suffered by the late Chinese Empire would serve as a factor in maintaining the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** is akin to "notching the boat to find the dropped sword" (刻舟求剑 / acting with absolute disregard for changing circumstances).

We can elaborate on this from the following three aspects.

First, when the Western Han faced the Xiongnu threat, Chinese society was still in the ***classical period*** (古典时期) where **class transition** was occurring. Although the wars unifying China under the Qin and the Chu-Han Contention had physically largely annihilated the clan-based aristocracy (氏族贵族) that had existed since the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), remnants of slavery remained exceedingly widespread. The newly emerging ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) was still far from capable of standing at the center of the political stage as the backbone of society.

Therefore, for a ***classical empire*** like the Western Han, facing the Xiongnu's daily growing military threat, it indeed possessed a certain rationality to establish an unprecedentedly powerful bureaucratic system to integrate social resources and hurl them into the war *(provided, of course, it had the capability to achieve this)*.

However, the situation facing the ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** was entirely different. From the Sui and Tang to the Ming and Qing, the ***feudal landlord class*** genuinely played the dominant role in China's economic production; thus, from an economic perspective, it was indeed already a class capable of exerting a greater societal function.

This brings us to a glaringly simple reality: there was no economic obstacle preventing China from entering a feudal class society. It was the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** that, employing administrative power backed by military force, coercively prevented this from happening.

Therefore, when we consider whether the argument holds that external pressure during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** became the reason for the bureaucratic system's continuation, the

very first thing we must ponder is this: **when the level of *productive forces* could already realize a *feudal system*, which is militarily superior—the *feudal system* or the *restoration-bureaucratic system*?**

I believe the answer to this question is resoundingly clear. Under a ***feudal system*** (封建制), ***feudal lords*** needed to bear military obligations and possessed an immensely urgent need to protect their own territories through armed force. Consequently, they bore no psychological burden when adopting new military technologies, and enthusiastically welcomed any military revolution capable of effectively enhancing their own combat power.

From the ***High Middle Ages*** to around the end of the ***Middle Ages***, Europe experienced tremendous progress in the military domain. In terms of equipment *(whether the most traditional armor or the most advanced muskets and artillery)*, military engineering *(such as fortress construction and ballistics)*, tactics *(such as the Spanish tercio /* 西班牙方阵*)*, and army organization *(professionalized armies)*, Europe had established distinct advantages over other regions of the world. This provided the martial guarantee for Europe's conquest of various parts of the globe following the Age of Discovery.

Although **feudalized** Japan, isolated in the East, could not remotely compare militarily to Europe at the time, once matchlock muskets (火枪) were introduced in the mid-16th century, it took merely half a century for firearms to become comprehensively popularized across the archipelago, profoundly influencing the military and politics of the late Sengoku period.

By the time Toyotomi Hideyoshi launched the invasion of ***Korea***, the Japanese army of over a hundred thousand—despite conducting overseas operations beyond their borders—could still inflict massive casualties upon the Ming-Joseon allied forces *(reversing the order is too strange)*, even killing high-ranking generals of both nations. Even though the Ming Empire ultimately repelled Japan, it suffered a catastrophic drain on its own vitality (元气大伤).

Volume 208 of the *History of Ming* (《明史》) explicitly states: *"Since the Japanese wreaked havoc in **Korea** for seven years, hundreds of thousands of troops were lost, and millions in stipends were squandered; the Middle Kingdom and its vassal state possessed no winning strategy until the Kampaku (Hideyoshi) died, whereupon the disaster finally ceased."*(自倭乱朝鲜七载，丧师数十万，糜饷数百万，中朝与属国迄无胜算，至关白死而祸始息。)

For a long time, the East Asian mainland possessed an overwhelming military superiority over the Japanese archipelago. Originally, given the geographical scale of population, the number, scope, and intensity of wars, as well as foreign exchanges, this was an inevitable reality. During the early

Japanese ***Middle Ages*** (***Chūsei*** / 中世) when the Yuan Dynasty attacked Kyushu, this superiority was still extremely glaring.

Thus, we can see that when the Japanese ***Chūsei*** drew to its close, the military gap between the Japanese archipelago and the East Asian mainland had drastically narrowed.

In reality, in a ***restoration-bureaucratic state***, the generals commanding wars are, first and foremost, officials. In some cases, they are not even military generals but civil bureaucrats, or they are forced to endure civil bureaucrats or eunuchs serving as army supervisors (太监监军).

Under these circumstances, for the generals themselves, scheming and jockeying for position (钻营) within the bureaucratic system is obviously far more beneficial than contemplating how to seriously fight a war. Moreover, within China's political environment, achieving military merit not only fails to bring any tangible benefits but easily turns one into a target for public attack and arouses the emperor's suspicion.

Therefore, we can see that even within China, the contrast between the two systems remains glaringly conspicuous.

During the bureaucratic restoration phase, the Song Dynasty, as the first mature ***restoration-bureaucratic empire***, invariably had "military debility" (军事孱弱) as one of its primary images. The Ming Empire's national defense policy was equally exceedingly passive; merely half a century after its founding, its territories began to gradually shrink.

Conversely, the armies that were genuinely renowned for their martial prowess and practically accomplished the enterprise of expanding the frontiers all possessed distinct ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征), or even inherently belonged to **military aristocracy** (军事贵族) conglomerates.

Examples include: the *Fubing* (府兵 / militia system) from the Western Wei to the Tang Dynasty, composed of rich peasants bringing their own weapons *(especially during the Western Wei, when the Fubing were entirely exempt from the Zu-Yong-Diao taxes, rendering their feudal nature even stronger)*; the armed forces of the frontier warlords (藩镇武装) from the mid-to-late Tang to the Five Dynasties; the armies of the Liao, Jin, and Mongol Empires; the *Weisuo* troops (卫所兵) commanded by the meritorious nobles in the early Ming Dynasty; and the Eight Banners army (八旗军) of the Later Jin and Qing Dynasties.

Consequently, a highly dramatic phenomenon in the late stage of the Chinese Empire was that the Tang Dynasty's own bureaucratization was actively destroying the foundation of the *Fubing* system, rendering its expansion naturally ephemeral (昙花一现). By the time the Tang Dynasty perished, the fundamental territories of the Chinese Empire were no larger than they had been at the very beginning of the Sui unification, and the frontiers everywhere presented a scene of total collapse.

Even though the Song and Ming—two dynasties established by the Han people—possessed "military aristocracies" endowed with the merit of assisting the founding emperor (从龙之功) at the very beginning, the despotic monarchs of the ***bureaucratic state*** were intensely vigilant against these aristocrats potentially dividing or weakening their power. In a very short time, employing both hard and soft tactics, the emperors would cause them to disappear or at least lose all political influence. Thus, when facing external military threats, the Song and Ming dynasties rapidly sank into a highly passive situation.

Paradoxically, once ethnic minorities invaded and ruled ***Handi*** (***China Proper*** / 汉地), because the population of their own people was vastly smaller compared to the Han Chinese, and ethnic contradictions objectively existed, the minority monarchs were compelled to rely on the armed forces of their own ethnic **military aristocracies** to counterbalance the Han Chinese. And this, astonishingly, became the *only* reliable force capable of territorial expansion during the late stage of the Chinese Empire.

The fact is, after the Western Han laid the foundation for China's territory, all parts of China's *de jure* territory today—except for the various regions of ***Handi*** within the Great Wall—were initially contributed by dynasties established by three ethnic minorities: the Jin, Yuan, and Qing. Even Yunnan and Guizhou, which were considered part of the "**Eighteen Provinces of China Proper**" (汉地十八省) by the Qing Dynasty, were originally conquered by Mongol military force.

In conclusion, whether viewed theoretically or factually, when the economic level is sufficient to support the stable existence of a ***feudal system***, the ***feudal system***'s military performance is vastly superior to that of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***.

Second, the bureaucratic system itself had undergone a distinct transformation—a fact exceptionally prone to being overlooked by observers.

During Emperor Wu's era, although an overly premature bureaucratic system was formed, the Han Dynasty was, after all, still in the classical stage of **class transition**. The expansion of the bureaucracy itself was a normal phenomenon *(though it is apparent in hindsight that the Han Dynasty over-expanded significantly)*.

It must be pointed out that because the Han bureaucratic system occupied a unique historical position, it initially even accelerated the process of the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) stepping onto the historical stage *(because the **landlord class** had gradually formed an economic advantage, and public/private schools as well as the official selection systems favored them in acquiring power and position within the bureaucracy)*.

Consequently, the newly emerging ***landlord class*** threw themselves into state politics with immense enthusiasm. They believed a solid bond existed between themselves and the empire, and paid close attention to the wars against the empire's arch-enemies. Even the war itself aroused the fanaticism of the emerging ***landlord class***.

The emperor, adhering to the principle of "starve anyone but the army, forget anything but rewarding military merit," repaid meritorious individuals with gold, land, and noble titles. War became a casino for the newly emerging ***landlord class*** to acquire political status.

The Han bureaucratic system demonstrated exceptional administrative efficiency and low **internal friction** (内耗). While the court extracted wealth from all sectors of society, it simultaneously made massive, effective technological investments. This led to a rapid elevation of Han's technological level, especially reflected in the military domain—epitomized by the comprehensive popularization of iron weapons—which further expanded China's military superiority over surrounding regions, in turn encouraging external expansion.

Based on the above reasons, the Han bureaucratic system transformed the entire empire into a highly efficient war machine possessed of terrifying power.

However, in the *restoration-bureaucratic phase* (复辟官僚阶段), all of the aforementioned reasons completely vanished.

In this period, the absolute primary objective of the bureaucracy itself was to continuously suppress the ***landlord class*** to prevent it from seizing power—a goal inherently contrary to the ***economic base*** (经济基础).

To maintain such a ***superstructure*** (上层建筑) that was utterly incompatible with the ***economic base***, the entire political system was inevitably fraught with internal friction; indeed, **it *had* to consume itself internally.**

In fact, starting from the late Chinese Empire, for the emperors and the court bureaucrats, the empire's greatest imaginary enemy was never external, nor was it any neighboring hostile regime; **it**

was precisely the very people they ruled—first the economically powerful ***landlord class***, and then the destitute, restless commoners.

Plunging society into internal friction would certainly weaken the state's power, ultimately leading to national subjugation in the long run. But without this internal friction, their thrones would not be secure for a single day.

Compared to feudal states, what ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** lacked was not just military capability, but the fundamental attitude toward the grand affairs of state—military affairs.

Rather than fearing a general losing a battle, the emperor was far more terrified of a general winning a battle; rather than fearing the pillaging of *barbarian regimes*, the Son of Heaven and his myriad officials were far more terrified of the commoners rising up in rebellion.

If observers look back at the Song Dynasty's army and think for just a moment, they will realize that this massive armed force was not so much for defending against the Western Xia and Khitans, as it was for guarding against those "tattooed exiles and conscripts" (配军之贼) within their own ranks.

As with the soldiers, so with the generals. Since the state was the private property of a single family (一姓之私产), as long as a deal could be struck, no part of state sovereignty could not be sold; among the meritorious officials who established military achievements, none was exempt from execution. I believe the history of the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties has completely and clearly demonstrated this point, rendering any further elaboration entirely unnecessary.

If anyone expects stellar military performance from a regime that views the maintenance of the despotic rulers' privileges as the overwhelmingly paramount "stability," a government that points its bayonets inward and aims its blades at its own people—that person is an absolute idiot.

Throughout the entire ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, the Chinese Empire's massive, disorganized, poorly equipped, and combat-ineffective army was utterly a "colossus with feet of clay" (泥足巨人). There are countless examples of small numbers of elite, feudalized ***barbarian*** warriors shattering a massive army like a hot knife slicing through butter (像热刀切黄油一样).

Therefore, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** bears absolutely no comparability to the bureaucratic system when it was newly formed in the Han Dynasty. To assume that because the latter possessed stellar military performance, the former would too, is completely irrational.

We can peer into the military system of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** through a micro-historical event that occurred during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***: the "Jianzhou Mutiny" (建州兵变), which took place between the first and second years of the Jianyan era (1127–1128 AD) under Emperor Gaozong of Song.

(The Jianzhou mutiny is relatively completely recorded in the "Chronological Record of the Reign Since Jianyan" /《建炎以来系年要录》. The Jianzhou mentioned here was an administrative unit during the Tang and Song periods located in present-day northern Fujian Province, China, and is completely unrelated to the "Jianzhou" in Northeast China).

The brilliance of this case lies in the fact that, although its duration and scope were very limited, it perfectly encapsulated a series of appalling military performances by the Chinese Empire during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***.

First, the court defaulted on the troops' deserved remuneration. The ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** could obviously no longer implement universal conscription (义务兵役制) like the ***classical empire*** of the Han Dynasty. Yet, while implementing a mercenary system (募兵制), the court never forgot the cost-saving benefits of universal conscription. It existed in a hypocritical state of wanting it both ways, making the full payment of military stipends virtually a miracle.

Second, when facing local turmoil, the combat results of civil bureaucrats commanding troops were utterly disastrous. Suppressing a rebellion in a single prefecture actually required mobilizing the central imperial army. Moreover, both mutinies were ultimately subdued through the deception of offering amnesty (招安).

Third, even though less than two years had passed since the Jingkang Incident (靖康之变 / the catastrophic fall of the Northern Song), the court *never* forgot to scheme against its own people. After the first rebellion of the Jianzhou troops ended, the court attempted to use a "borrowed knife to kill" (借刀杀人) by mobilizing them northward to engage the Jin army in a suicidal battle, which directly provoked the second Jianzhou mutiny.

Fourth, immediately following both amnesties, the court broke its promises and summarily executed all the mutiny leaders. This fully demonstrates that under the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, the cost for the bureaucratic government to violate promises and agreements was virtually zero. Consequently, a highly tense and suspicious political atmosphere inevitably emerged.

Fifth, prior to the second Jianzhou mutiny, the ringleaders, including Ye Nong, slaughtered their own wives and children. Their purpose was to eliminate their own "weaknesses/leverage" (软肋), thereby reducing the court's means of coercing and controlling them.

Scanning all uprisings in history across the globe, it is almost impossible for people to find insurgents murdering their own wives and children first outside of China.

As long as one understands the history of China, it becomes glaringly obvious that **using family members as "leverage" to threaten one's own people has, since ancient times, been a brilliant, hallmark tactic of the Chinese court to brutalize its populace.**

During the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, such tactics were, of course, relentlessly employed by the court against its own military. This differs drastically from feudal Europe and Japan.

In societies ruled by ***feudal lords*** as aristocrats, there ultimately existed widely recognized codes of conduct among the nobility. The immense cost of breaking covenants was something Chinese despots could not even imagine. Moreover, for a ***feudal lord***, the peasant conscripts they levied were indeed their subjects (领民); but were the wives and children of these peasant conscripts not *also* their subjects?

In regions bristling with feudal rulers, employing indiscriminate slaughter to terrorize the populace yielded virtually no benefits other than violently shaking the foundation of one's own rule.

The restored Chinese Empire had absolutely no need to consider this. **One of the bedrock foundations of its rule was the implementation of absolute terror, and the people were never once viewed as human beings by the imperial family and the bureaucracy.**

One only needs to observe the state of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state***'s military power depicted through a minor event like the Jianzhou Mutiny to naturally arrive at a definitive judgment regarding the true nature of military performance under such a political system.

Third, the military situation China itself faced had also undergone massive changes—a point even more easily overlooked than the previous one.

If we look at historical maps from around the beginning of the Common Era, perhaps the most overwhelming impression is how incredibly vast and empty the world still was. There were incredibly massive regions left uncolored—simply because they were too backward, lacked written records, and it was impossible to determine what regimes existed there. This was precisely the characteristic of the ***classical period*** (古典时期).

True, in the centuries preceding the formation of the ***classical empires***, civilization had expanded significantly within the borders of these empires. However, compared to the still-vast wilderness, the civilized world occupied only a tiny fraction of the total area.

If we turn our gaze back to the Han Dynasty, a glaringly obvious fact is that the ***Zhongyuan*** heartland—centered around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River—already possessed a long agricultural history. During the zenith of the Western Han, over half of its 60 million population was concentrated there, and the empire's rule over this region had assumed a "surface-area" (面状) form.

Conversely, the Han Empire could not possibly maintain such a "surface-area" administrative management across its vastly larger frontier regions. Its rule there could only assume a "point-and-line" (点线状) form. *(The so-called "points" were administrative units like commanderies and counties, and the "lines" were vital roads crucial to the court that required military protection).*

It was merely that the points and lines were denser closer to the ***Zhongyuan***; in extremely remote frontier regions like Gojoseon (古朝鲜), Jiaozhou (交州), and Yunnan, the points and lines became exceedingly sparse.

Therefore, the borders between states presented the following state: increasingly sparse "point-and-line" governance structures extending from the heartlands of both sides toward the borderlands from different directions *(naturally, lines would intersect, as roads eventually connect)*. Although the borders might appear incredibly long on a map, the actual points of contact between the two sides were far more limited.

Precisely because the potential points of contact were limited, for a ***classical state***, dispatching a massive army to cross the border from a few limited contact points, uprooting the enemy's "governing points" one by one along their "governing lines," and then driving deep into the enemy's "surface-area" governing core was indeed a highly efficient choice for defeating the enemy *(provided, of course, they could actually break through)*.

Therefore, large-scale armed expeditions dispatched by ***classical states*** to subjugate peripheral countries or attack each other—just like the Han Dynasty's external conquests—were relatively common military phenomena during the ***classical period***. *(This primarily refers to Rome confronting Parthia and Persia; however, it must be emphasized that the Xiongnu's military power was inherently no weaker than these **classical empires**, though I do not classify the Xiongnu as a **classical empire**, for reasons detailed in Sections 25 and 30 of Chapter 12).*

However, *feudalization* changed all of this.

The elevation of ***productive forces*** (生产力) and the establishment of ***feudal relations of production*** enabled the growing population to transform the point-and-line rule in civilization's border regions into surface-area rule through land reclamation.

For mutually hostile regimes, even if the borderlines of the ***classical period*** and those a millennium later were drawn identically on a map, they had become radically different in reality. The degree of intimate contact occurring in the latter was something the former could not even remotely compare to.

Actually, if one is relatively familiar with China's military history, it is easy to realize that such glaring changes occurred even within the Chinese interior. A highly fascinating example is this: if you observe the domestic wars from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods to the Qin, Han, and Three Kingdoms periods, you will find that perilous mountain passes and vital river crossings occupied staggeringly important positions in contemporaneous military theory. Many of them were termed "strategic chokepoints contested by all military strategists" (兵家必争之地), to the extent that their gain or loss directly dictated the outcome of a war.

But looking at the most recent ten centuries, people will realize that Chinese military strategists obviously no longer attached such extreme importance to these "impregnable passes and great river crossings" (雄关大津) within the interior. Those strategic strongholds once deemed capable of *"one man holding the pass against ten thousand"* (一夫当关万夫莫开) have been proven by successive falls to be insufficient as impregnable bastions (金城汤池) to secure the state.

Instead, people began to increasingly value the significance of overarching geopolitical blocs (地缘板块) in military strategy.

A major reason for this shift was that land reclamation was continuously progressing even within China's interior. Certain locations, endowed with the most optimal natural conditions, were initially favored by people, forming vital thoroughfares. But as China's population pressure gradually mounted, other places originally deemed unsuitable for survival were sooner or later opened up as residential areas, naturally creating new possibilities for transit.

With border contacts becoming so intensely dense, the era of relying on one or two impregnable passes to secure a regional fiefdom was naturally gone forever.

If this was the case in the relatively early-developed interior of China, such changes could only be even more pronounced in the border regions.

The fact is, while China halted its ***feudalization*** process starting from the Northern and Southern Dynasties and pivoted toward bureaucratization, the historical progression of other parts of the world—including the regions surrounding China—proceeded normally, and most of the Eurasian continent successively entered the era of ***feudalization***.

When **feudal regimes** or highly **feudalized** regimes also appeared on China's borders, for a ***restoration-bureaucratic state***, tasking the imperial army with guarding incredibly long borderlines brimming with points of contact became excruciatingly costly and egregiously inefficient.

Conversely, the most efficient method was obviously to let the ***feudal lords*** (vassals) guard such borders. Local manpower, material, and financial resources integrated on the spot under the command of lords possessing an intense desire to defend their own territories would not only incur minimal friction but also ensure rapid reaction speeds.

We must emphasize that in regions where the ***feudal system*** was more typical, military border conflicts rarely manifested as the massive, head-on clashes characteristic of the ***classical period***, where giant armies sought to swallow the enemy's main force whole to conquer vast swathes of territory in one stroke. In fact, in a ***feudal society*** like Europe, a lord would be better off hoping to birth a few more daughters to inherit the enemy's country through marriage, rather than relying on such methods to acquire territory.

Even in Chinese history, it is easy to notice that being gradually nibbled away (受到蚕食), or proactively abandoning territories because the skyrocketing costs of governance simply could not make ends meet (入不敷出)—rather than losing the capacity for war due to the continuous annihilation of armies—was exactly the situation the courts of the late Chinese Empire encountered on their borders for the vast majority of the time.

Take ***Korea*** as an example. When Silla (新罗) was just established, even present-day Pyongyang was not within its borders *(when Silla first expelled the Tang army, the boundary with the Tang Empire was essentially the Taedong River, and present-day Pyongyang is north of the Taedong River)*. Yet today, the border between North Korea and China is already the Yalu River.

Did the Koreans expand so far north entirely by fighting pitched battles? Obviously not. For the vast majority of the time, this expansion was nothing more than gradual nibbling (蚕食)—moving the boundary marker forward by one meter today, and two meters tomorrow.

The gradual breaking away of the Southwest region from the Chinese Empire during China's ***feudalization*** period follows the exact same logic. This appears exceptionally bizarre if one looks at Tan Qixiang's *The Historical Atlas of China* (《中国历史地图集》).

It clearly belonged to Ningzhou (宁州) during the Liu Song of the Southern Dynasties; it was still there during the Liang Dynasty; still there during the Qi Dynasty; and during the Chen Dynasty, it somehow ended up within the territory of Northern Zhou. Then, in the Sui Dynasty maps, control was suddenly lost, only for a highly threatening Nanzhao (南诏) to suddenly pop up in the Tang Dynasty.

(The reality is that the court had long lost control. The position of Inspector of Ningzhou was merely an absentee title [遥领]; the local area was actually ruled by powerful local clans of various sizes, the strongest among them being the Cuan clan [爨氏]).

It is precisely this inexplicable breaking away that reflects the true nature of the challenge the empire encountered on its borders when ***feudalization*** emerged in China's frontier and surrounding regions.

It was no longer the massive, clamorous invasion of tens or hundreds of thousands of ***barbarian*** troops—the kind of event a generation might not encounter even once. Instead, it was incessant, pervasive, small-scale incursions and pillaging, coupled with chronic, unceasing localism and centrifugal forces (离心力).

For enemies with a significantly higher ***degree of feudalization*** than the empire, such harassment did not necessarily demand significant battle outcomes *(and many times, they were not even government actions)*. Failing to succeed resulted in no real loss—after all, there was virtually no initial investment. But once they succeeded, they would settle, cultivate, and fortify the small patches of land they acquired.

The enemies knew full well that the commoners of the Chinese Empire could not deal with them using the same methods. Because the court controlled the Chinese commoners through the system of "registering households and unifying the populace" (编户齐民), **terrified that the commoners might spontaneously build grassroots organizations.** They loathed the idea of the commoners pursuing their own interests instead of acting according to the court's will, and deeply resented them fleeing abroad.

The vast majority of imperial officials would, naturally, choose to hush things up and maintain a false peace (息事宁人). Reporting such minuscule territorial losses would only jeopardize their own official careers.

Even if the imperial rulers knew the truth, they might not be willing to take any action. Because for a ***bureaucratic state***, taking actions that might trigger unpredictable changes over trivial matters

was perceived as far more dangerous than losing a tiny bit of territory. If the territory was recovered, they had to consider how to reward the meritorious officials; if it wasn't, the majesty of the Celestial Empire (天朝的威严) would be damaged. Therefore, pretending not to know was naturally the optimal strategy.

History has fully proven the failure of ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** in frontier governance. On the contrary, during the late stages of the empire, the regimes that were relatively successful in frontier governance were precisely those established by ethnic minorities with a relatively higher ***degree of feudalization***.

If we look at the Ming Dynasty's "Nine Garrisons" (九边地区) facing Mongolia, you will find that before the Tumu Crisis (土木堡之变), the Ming army had suffered no major defeats, yet the borders were already shrinking inward. After the Tumu Crisis, they still did not suffer any catastrophic defeats, yet the borders continued to shrink inward, until they retreated entirely to the Great Wall—the border wall continuously perfected by the Ming Empire to isolate the interior from the exterior.

In other words, the Ming Dynasty's loss of control over the territories and depth beyond the Great Wall was not because they genuinely lost so many main forces that they had no combat-capable troops left and were forced to abandon it. Rather, **they were forced to retreat because they could not cope with the nibbling tactics of the Mongolian tribes!** And this outcome occurred despite the capital itself being located right next to the Great Wall.

In more distant places, such as Vietnam, the empire's failure could only be even swifter.

When Emperor Chengzu of Ming, Zhu Di (明成祖朱棣), invaded Vietnam, he was undoubtedly still harboring the mindset of the ***classical period*** while acting as an emperor in the 15th century. After Vietnam had also undergone a considerably long process of ***feudalization***, the Red River Delta was no longer a place that could be firmly grasped simply by controlling a few vital transportation routes and central metropolis.

The circulating officials (*Liuguan* / 流官) of the empire had absolutely no interest in earnestly governing their jurisdictions. The cost and probability of genuinely producing administrative achievements in such remote frontiers, gaining the court's approval, and subsequently earning a promotion could not possibly compare to the strategy of fabricating "auspicious omens" (制造祥瑞), scraping the fat and marrow of the people (搜刮民脂民膏)—especially local specialty products—and bribing superiors and subordinates within the system.

As for organizing resistance when the Vietnamese rebel forces approached, that was even more impossible. Aside from the Ming garrison troops, would the local commoners ever support them?

If we hypothesize that the Ming Dynasty were a **feudal regime**, after the Ming army conquered Vietnam, had they subinfeudated (转封) a batch of Chinese ***feudal lords*** into Vietnam while retaining the Vietnamese ***feudal lords*** who supported the Ming, thereby maintaining a state of local autonomy—then even if Lê Lợi (黎利) had struggled in Lam Sơn for over a decade, it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to achieve anything of consequence.

A world-renowned example of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***'s complete impotence in the face of such increasingly **feudalized** border threats is the so-called "Wokou" (Japanese pirates / 倭寇) issue during the Yuan and Ming periods.

The Wokou, operating as pirates along the coast of the East Asian mainland, initially had Japanese *Ronin* (浪人) at their core. Later, they even evolved into multi-ethnic pirate syndicates, with ethnic Japanese constituting only a small fraction.

Yet, it was exactly such a disunited, highly irregular armed conglomerate that astonishingly managed to run rampant along the Chinese coast for nearly three centuries, reducing the Ming Empire's *Haijin* (sea ban / 海禁) to a virtual laughingstock. The imperial army was utterly helpless for a prolonged period; there was even the bizarre incident where a mere few dozen Wokou managed to rampage all the way to the city walls of Nanjing.

For the Ming court to genuinely reverse this embarrassing situation in combating the Wokou, it ultimately had to rely on armies independently organized and trained by individual generals *(which inherently possessed strong characteristics of feudalized private militias)*.

However, the true decline of the Wokou was less attributable to any genuine combat achievements of the Ming army, and far more a result of the Longqing Emperor lifting the sea ban (隆庆开海) and the Oda-Toyotomi regime (织丰政权) unifying Japan.

The above facts demonstrate that even setting aside the gross inefficiency of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*'s** military system and the abysmal combat effectiveness of its army, its very organizational form alone was already starkly maladapted to the border situations of the ***feudalization*** period. This, again, falls massively short compared to the feudal military systems that should have developed according to the normal course of history.

In summary, there is absolutely no reason to believe that just because the **bureaucratic system** during the Han Dynasty forged a massive and formidable army capable of countering military threats, the Chinese Empire during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** could achieve the same.

Countless facts prove that the military performance of ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** cannot remotely compare to what a China normally embarking upon the path of ***feudalization*** would have achieved.

3, The Chinese Rulers Were Crystal Clear About the Military Superiority of the Feudal System

The third aspect: the conclusion that the ***feudal system*** is militarily superior to the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** is fundamentally not a realization exclusive to modern people. The fact is, during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, even despotic monarchs (专制君主) and high-ranking bureaucrats had no choice but to admit this.

If we direct our attention to some of the most crucial historical documents from the transition between the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties—namely, the *Compiled Documents on the Treaties with the North during Three Reigns* (《三朝北盟会编》) and the *Chronological Record of the Reign Since Jianyan* (《建炎以来系年要录》)—it is not difficult to discover contemporaneous acknowledgments of the pronounced superiority of ***feudalized*** frontier warlords (藩镇) when facing the pressure of newly emerging ethnic minority regimes.

Below, I list a few historical fragments whose contents are exceptionally fascinating. One can easily discern from them just how crystal clear an understanding China's rulers and high intellectuals still possessed regarding the "success or failure of the realm" (天下成败) even as late as the early 12th century.

The first record is a memorial submitted by the Censor-in-Chief (御史中丞) Qin Hui (秦桧) to the Supreme Marshal's Office of the Jin Dynasty right after the Jingkang Incident (靖康之变) occurred (the second month of the second year of Jingkang). This is found in Volume 2 of *The Record* (《要录》) and Volume 80 of *The Compilation* (《会编》), which contains the following passage:

> "Ever since the Great Jin dispatched its armies to condemn the ***Zhongyuan*** last year, over a year has passed in border incursions and battles. (大金自去岁问罪中原，入境征战已逾岁矣。) However, the reason you conquer whatever you attack is nothing else but the fact that the Great Jin has long been accustomed to warfare, whereas China has enjoyed a century of peace; our soldiers are scarcely trained, and we have not found the right men to serve as generals and commanders. (然所攻必克者无他，以大金久习兵革，中国承平百年，士卒罕练将帅未得其人也。) Since ancient times, the might of

> China's territory and armored troops has been unmatched by any neighbor, and the world has never lacked talented heroes to serve as generals and ministers. (自古中国地土甲兵之威四邻无有，将相英雄世不乏才。) If, in the future, our soldiers become highly trained like the troops of the Tang Dynasty's frontier warlords, and we obtain the right men as generals and ministers like the loyal subjects of Emperors Daizong and Suzong of Tang—(使异日士卒精练，若唐藩镇之兵，将相得人，若唐代肃之臣。) Could the Great Jin still be absolutely certain of its victory over China?!" (大金之於中国能必其胜哉！)

The core purpose of Qin Hui's admonition to the Jin rulers lay in two points: do not annihilate the Song *(to establish Zhang Bangchang)*, and do not massacre the Zhao imperial clan of Song. As the stance of a minister of a subjugated nation, this was entirely normal.

What truly imbues this document with profound "historical significance" is the astonishing argument Qin Hui presented. After initially emphasizing that the Zhao Song's Mandate of Heaven had not yet been extinguished, he highly cryptically pointed out where the critical crux of interests lay:

*"The reason you Jin people were able to drive deep and achieve such massive battle results is not because you are invincibly strong, but because the Song Dynasty itself is extremely debilitated. (*你们金人之所以能够长驱直入取得如此之大的战果，并非因为你们强到不可战胜，而是宋朝本身极度衰弱所致。*)*

*—(Since the Five Dynasties, the Song Dynasty, in order to suppress all possible domestic uncertainties, established an unprecedentedly massive bureaucratic system. The emperor prioritized his own interests above those of the state, fearing his own army and generals more than he feared foreign armies and generals.) (*自五代之后，宋朝建立为了压制国内一切可能的不确定因素建立了空前庞大的官僚体制，皇帝视自己的利益高过了国家的利益，担心自己的军队和将领超过了担心异族的军队和将领*)*

*Therefore, the armed forces of the entire nation collapse at the first blow. (*因此整个国家的武装力量不堪一击。*)*

*—(If today the Jin Dynasty insists on exterminating the Zhao clan, it would ironically be ridding the realm of an autocrat.) (*今天金朝如果非要尽诛赵氏，那么反而为天下除去一个独夫*)*

Feudalized *frontier warlords like those of the Tang Dynasty would then spring up one after another. (像唐代那样的封建化藩镇就会接踵而起。)*

Relying on China's demographic and economic scale, at that time, do you Jin people truly believe you could still fight and win? (凭借中国的人口和经济规模，到那个时候你们金人自忖还能战而胜之吗？)

It is better to preserve the state altars of the Song and still let the Zhao clan rule as despotic monarchs. —(This way, the Zhao imperial house, for the private interests of their single family, will first and foremost remain vigilant against their own generals and commoners, thereby eliminating this genuine danger on behalf of the Jin people.)— This is beneficial to both you Jin rulers and the Zhao Song imperial family." (不如保留宋朝的社稷，仍然让赵氏做专制君主，（这样赵宋官家为了一姓私利首先警惕自己的将领和百姓，替金人消弭了这一真正的危险）对于你们金朝统治者也好，赵宋皇室也罢都是有利的。)

This memorial by Qin Hui fully reflects his astonishing foresight as a quintessential "bureaucratic politician" (官僚主义政治家) unique to China. Even right after the Jingkang Incident occurred, he already possessed a crystal-clear understanding of the situation of the realm and the demands of all parties' interests.

Qin Hui clearly realized that, in responding to historical events like the Jin invasion, ***feudalized*** frontier warlords possessed an incomparable superiority over the Song Dynasty's bureaucratic system.

However, out of historical memories of the fragmented late Tang and Five Dynasties, and the absolute need to maintain despotic rule, the despotic monarchs of the Song Empire inevitably felt as if sitting on a bed of nails (如坐针毡) regarding these threats sleeping right beside their beds. Once the Song Dynasty could achieve basic parity with the Jin Dynasty, the emperor's fear of the frontier warlords would blatantly surpass his fear of foreign ***barbarians*** who could be placated with land, wealth, and people.

Therefore, at the very beginning of the Jingkang Incident, Qin Hui astutely pointed out that, in the long run, negotiating a peace treaty was mutually beneficial to the rulers of both nations.

However, the rapidly rising Jin people could not possibly comprehend Chinese politics so quickly, nor could they slam the brakes on their chariot of conquest so fast. In order to force the Jin people back to the negotiating table, the Southern Song had no choice but to emulate the Tang frontier

warlords, utilizing military commanders who were ***feudalized*** to a certain degree to achieve military parity by force and realize a peace treaty as quickly as possible.

Once this was done, they could concentrate all their energy on using both hard and soft tactics to snatch back the military power of these generals. As for those among them who possessed considerable battle merit and prestige but were not entirely submissive, they could be executed even on "groundless" (莫须有 / *Moxuyou*) charges.

The historical tableau unfurled across the Chinese land during the transition between the two Song dynasties paints a crystal-clear picture for posterity of the extreme reactionary nature (极端反动性) of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state***, as well as the sheer subjectivity of its implementation of reactionary policies.

The second record is a memorial submitted to Zhao Gou (Emperor Gaozong of Song) by the then-Chancellor (宰相) Li Gang (李纲) on the 2nd day of the 6th month of the first year of Jianyan *(the same year as the second year of Jingkang, i.e., 1127 AD)*, barely a month after Zhao Gou ascended the throne. This is found in Volume 6 of *The Record* (《要录》) and Volume 105 of *The Compilation* (《会编》).

The meaning of this memorial was exceptionally blunt: to resolutely and publicly abandon peace negotiations, unequivocally continue the war against the Jin Dynasty, first strengthen defenses, and subsequently plot for revenge. All state affairs at present should revolve around the war against Jin. In this memorial, Li Gang explicitly pointed out that frontier warlords (藩镇) were extremely useful and necessary at this moment.

> "For today's strategy, there is nothing better than halting all peace negotiations and focusing entirely on the tactic of self-defense. Establish frontier warlord commands (藩镇) in strategic strongholds, and position marshal headquarters south of the Yellow River and the Jiang-Huai region. (为今之计，莫若一切罢和议，專务自守之策，建藩镇于要害之地，置帅府于大河及江淮之南，) Repair the city walls, prepare weapons and siege engines, train the naval forces, and practice chariot warfare. (修城壁，治器械，教水军，习车战，) Ensure that if the enemy advances, they gain nothing from plundering, and if they retreat, they suffer the peril of being intercepted. Thus, although they may appear and vanish, they will absolutely not dare to drive deep. (使其进无抄掠之得，退有邀击之患，则虽有出没，必不敢深入，) Within three to five

> years, military administration will be increasingly perfected, and armored troops and chariots will be fully prepared. Only then should we launch a massive campaign to subjugate them, to avenge the unshareable heaven of our enmity, and to wash away an unprecedented humiliation since antiquity! (三数年间，军政益修，甲车咸备，然后大举以讨之，报不共戴天之仇，雪振古所无之耻，) Once the enemy knows China has strengthened itself to such a degree, not only will they not dare to act tyrannically, but there will also be a reasonable path to safely securing the Two Sage Emperors (Huizong and Qinzong)!" (彼知中国自强如此，岂徒不敢肆横，而二圣有可安之理矣！)

In this exposition, one can clearly see that Li Gang possessed considerable cognitive understanding of the military function of the frontier warlords. He specifically pointed out that they could construct massive numbers of feudal castles and independently arm their troops.

Once the Jin army launched an offensive, the commoners near the castles could withdraw into them, and materials could be transferred and protected *(this is essentially identical to the **Middle Ages** in Europe)*. It would be incredibly difficult for the Jin army to conquer such castles, so even if they advanced, they would struggle to plunder many resources. But if the Jin army wanted to retreat easily, they would have to find ways to avoid pursuit by the armies within the castles. Thus, while the Jin army would still appear on the borders, it would be very difficult for them to drive deep.

This understanding very likely reflects how the Jin army's southern invasion awakened people's historical memories of the fortified manors (坞堡) extensively constructed by powerful Han Chinese clans in the North during the Sixteen Kingdoms period.

Emperor Gaozong's reaction to this memorial was: *"The Emperor was greatly pleased, and handed it to the Secretariat to be observed and implemented."* From this, it is evident that even Zhao Gou himself harbored no objections to Li Gang's proposal.

The third document is a suggestion presented by Xie Kejia (谢克家), the Minister of War (兵部尚书), in the 8th month of the third year of Jianyan, found in Volume 27 of *The Record* (《要录》). His words were exceedingly brief, yet virtually every sentence struck the vital core. This proposal by Xie Kejia can absolutely be hailed as the highest standard of Chinese political discourse from the Sui and Tang Dynasties to the present.

> "Xie Kejia, the Minister of War, stated: Today, there is an excess of redundant officials, especially in the outer provinces. I request that they all be dismissed to relieve the burden on the people's strength. (兵部尚书谢克家言，今日官冗，外方尤甚，请悉罢

之，以纾民力。) He also stated: The imperial army is weak and scarce, whereas the commanderies and counties all possess powerful local elites. We ought to order them to mutually elect leaders among themselves; those with wisdom and valor should each defend their own lands. Wherever commanderies and counties lack officials, I beg to permit the prefects to appoint them personally. (又言：‘官军单寡，而郡县皆有土豪，宜令自相推择，有智勇者各守其地，郡县有阙官处，乞许郡守自辟。) Provided there are no obstructions in the bureaucratic selection process, grant them official commissions. If they show favoritism or corruption, the supervising commissioners and censors can impeach them. (吏铨无碍，则付以告身。若其徇私，则监司、御史得以纠之。) Today, the Jingdong, Jingxi, and Jiang-Huai regions have all been reduced to wilderness and overgrown thickets; it is difficult to apply normal laws. We should establish frontier warlords (藩镇), conferring both civil and military authority, allowing them to act expediently according to circumstances, and permitting them to utilize financial revenues as they see fit. (今京东、西及江、淮悉为榛莽，难用常法，宜建藩镇，文武并授，令得便宜从事，财赋亦听自用。) If they achieve merit in defending against the enemy, permit them hereditary succession.'" (如捍御有功，则许世袭’。)

Astonishingly, five viewpoints are expressed within these mere four lines: **First,** although the phenomenon of redundant officials (冗官) in the Song Empire was itself a means of maintaining despotic imperial power and consolidating the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, implementing it now, when Jin troops were ravaging China and the Zhao Song imperial throne was already unstable, was utterly absurd. Particularly in the localities, the bloated bureaucracy fundamentally lacked effective response capabilities while pointlessly draining local financial resources; it was entirely insufficient to cope with military threats. He suggested they should be thoroughly dismissed, and the commoners should be spared further torment. **Second,** the locally powerful ***landlord class*** could serve as the mainstay in bearing military obligations to resist the Jin troops. Under the current circumstances, they should be heavily relied upon. Forget about whether it conformed to bureaucratic procedures; first bestow upon them the righteous titles and status. **Third,** although Emperor Taizong, Zhao Guangyi, was utterly determined to centralize the power of appointing and dismissing all officials nationwide, dealing with the Jin people was now the paramount task. The court should cease playing those tricks of mutual checks and balances that only dragged down everyone's legs. For now, it was best to decentralize personnel power to boost local enthusiasm and enhance their operational capacity. Officials recommended locally should be almost directly acknowledged; even if problems arose, having censors issue an impeachment or warning would suffice. **Fourth,** the thousands of kilometers of war zone between Song and Jin were currently in sheer chaos, with local heroes and warlords rising simultaneously. Talking about rebuilding the bureaucratic system was pure nonsense. We must urgently establish frontier warlords to win over those local armed forces, integrating both civil officials and military generals into the framework of

the *Fanzhen* (frontier warlords), expanding their power to make independent decisions. Simultaneously, cease collecting taxes from the warlords, allowing them to substitute taxes with military obligations. **Fifth,** as long as these frontier warlords achieved merit in resisting the Jin army, the court must not scheme to replace them with circulating officials (*Liuguan* / 流官); instead, directly permit them hereditary succession (世袭) and bestow upon them the titles of kings and dukes.

Therefore, one can distinctly sense from Xie Kejia's words that, even though the Chinese Empire had already entered the ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, up until the transition between the two Song dynasties, intellectuals still possessed a profound understanding of ***feudalization***. They were acutely aware of what characteristics a ***feudal society*** was supposed to have, and in their hearts, they understood perfectly well how massive the superiority of the ***feudal system*** was over the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***.

However, mutually interdependent monarchical despotism and the bureaucratic system had become so entrenched. Facing a massive threat like the Jin army's southern invasion, the court might temporarily permit some ***feudalized*** elements to reappear; but once the threat dissipated, the state inevitably reverted to its old path leading toward Doomsday.

Actually, anyone with sense can realize exactly *who* such a perverse bureaucratic system was primarily designed to target—it was never a secret.

For instance, during the most grueling period of Nazi Germany's invasion in 1942, the Soviet Union abolished the final decision-making power of the political commissars. From then on, the power of political cadres in the army was restricted and increasingly weakened.

Cunning and treacherous bureaucratic rulers never forget that their bayonets are pointed at their own people, not for the purpose of resisting some foreign invader. Once the external threat becomes too overwhelming, they themselves will dismantle aspects of the bureaucratic system to unleash the positive elements of the army and society. This point remains universally consistent, regardless of era, and across both China and foreign nations.

Apart from these three highly representative records, *The Record* (《要录》) contains many other accounts discussing the superiority and necessity of ***feudalized*** frontier warlords (藩镇).

For example, Volume 5 records that Tang Zhong (唐重), then in charge of administering the Guanzhong region, told Zhao Gou—who had just ascended the throne—that the most urgent matter for the realm right now was for the emperor to relocate to his region, and the second most urgent matter was to extensively establish frontier warlords.

Volume 21 records the eminent minister Zhang Jun (张浚) writing to Zhao Gou, stating that given the current situation north of the Yangtze River, it was impossible to govern using the bureaucratic system; establishing frontier warlords was absolutely mandatory. At that time, alongside Zhang Jun, 19 others submitted memorials emphasizing the necessity of establishing frontier warlords.

Volume 33 records Chancellor Fan Zongyin (范宗尹) advising Zhao Gou, saying it was true that Emperor Taizu, Zhao Kuangyin, pacified the world's frontier warlords, enabling the ***bureaucratic state*** to remain basically stable for 150 years. However, when the Jin troops drove south, the court's inability to cope was precisely the inherent flaw of the ***bureaucratic state***. To survive the current catastrophe, the frontier warlord system should be partially restored; vast regions south of the Yellow River and north of the Yangtze should be subinfeudated (裂土而治), allowing the warlord commanders to defend their respective territories as a defensive screen (屏障) for the court.

Later in the same volume, an edict issued by Zhao Gou himself is recorded. Following the classic nonsense format of Chinese political documents, this edict first affirmed the martial achievements of the Zhou Dynasty's enfeoffment system (封邦建国) in expanding the Huaxia realm, as well as the effectiveness of the Tang Dynasty's frontier warlords in resisting border threats. It then immediately announced that he would grant full autonomy to the anti-Jin armed forces in the contested zone between Song and Jin, allowing them absolute regional authority, stating that as long as they could hold off the Jin people, they would have merit.

But even so, Zhao Gou adamantly refused to grant these regional strongmen hereditary power (世袭权力).

Fan Zongyin and others countered that after years of war, the region north of the Yangtze was already in utter ruins; if the warlords were not permitted hereditary succession, who would fight to the death to defend it?

To this, Zhao Gou replied that it was absolutely impermissible. If just anyone could inherit titles hereditarily, what would be the point of him being a despotic emperor? Furthermore, he knew exactly what he was doing: all he wanted was for them to secure the remaining territory. He had zero expectations for a counter-offensive, and granting them this much authority was already sufficient to hold the line. Ultimately, he steadfastly refused to permit hereditary succession.

The most wryly amusing record is found in Volume 61, containing a rather lengthy memorial submitted to Zhao Gou by a commoner from Huangzhou named Wu Shen (吴伸).

Right from the start, Wu Shen condemned Zhao Gou's behavior of seeking only temporary, ignoble peace (苟求偏安) instead of aspiring to recover the lost territories and exact revenge. He pointed out that even seeking temporary peace was impossible, for since antiquity, during periods of North-South division, it had always been the North unifying the South; there was no counter-example. Even the puppet emperor of Qi, Liu Yu, knew to actively prepare for war against the Song. If you, the orthodox emperor, do absolutely nothing, wouldn't the chances of survival diminish the longer this dragged on?

He also heard that the Jin Dynasty might amass heavy troops to attack Sichuan from Guanzhong. If Sichuan were lost, it would be utterly over. The Southeast was never meant to be an imperial capital; once the upper reaches of the Yangtze were lost, Zhao Gou would swiftly become the next "Marquis of Returning Allegiance" Sun Hao (归命侯孙皓) or "Duke of Changcheng" Chen Shubao (长城公陈叔宝)—notorious monarchs of subjugated southern states.

At the end of the memorial, Wu Shen began worrying on behalf of Emperor Zhao Gou, noting that many regional commanders now possessed actual power identical to frontier warlords. How could an emperor yield military power to outsiders? But then he twisted his argument, clarifying that **although he opposed frontier warlords, he did not oppose *feudalism*. He merely opposed these frontier warlords being non-imperial vassals of different surnames.**

Therefore, he suggested that enfeoffment (分封) was absolutely necessary, but it should be bestowed upon the royal kinsmen of the Zhao clan. Just like the Zhou Dynasty, using the imperial clan as a defensive screen would ensure long-lasting prosperity.

Reading Wu Shen's memorial, it is hard not to realize that his understanding of history was quite astute for his time, indicating he likely hailed from a ***landlord class*** family with relatively good living conditions. However, it is almost certain that Wu himself had absolutely no connections at court. This is obvious because he was entirely ignorant of a widely known fact: the Zhao Song imperial family suffered from severe reproductive difficulties and high infant mortality rates.

Enfeoffing the imperial clan was a non-starter because there was simply no one to enfeoff; even Gaozong (Zhao Gou) himself had no heirs. If imperial kinsmen had to be enfeoffed, they could only find extremely distant branches, which would make them no different from outsiders. Yet even such a low-ranking member of the ***landlord class***, lacking political standing, simultaneously opposed warlords with different surnames while *not* opposing the institution of frontier warlords itself.

The sources of these aforementioned comments—which approved of establishing frontier warlords and acknowledged the distinct superiority of ***feudalized*** frontier warlords in resisting the Jin invasion—were incredibly diverse. They ranged from small landlords at the bottom to Emperor Zhao Gou himself at the top; moreover, the officials listed did not belong to a single political faction.

This fully demonstrates that even up to the early 12th century, the superiority of the *feudal system* was fundamentally not a secret in Chinese society; it was virtually common knowledge among all educated people.

However, to maintain their despotic rule, the rulers would rather sacrifice this superiority to uphold the massive cage that was the bureaucratic system.

The fact is, once the Southern Song and the Jin had reached a basic parity, the despotic monarch of the Southern Song was inevitably going to systematically eliminate the military commanders, whom he viewed as thorns in his eyes and flesh (眼中钉、肉中刺).

In *The Record*, the murder of Yue Fei (岳飞) is recorded in Volume 143. In the records following that event, the image of the frontier warlords as battle-hardened veterans capable of warfare was swiftly replaced by an image of them being "domineering and lawless" (跋扈不法), laying bare the sheer brutality and hypocrisy of the ***bureaucratic state***.

In Volume 147, Zhao Gou explicitly told Qin Hui that the reason the Tang Dynasty's frontier warlords spiraled out of control was that the court did not cut them down early enough. Therefore, he was determined to comprehensively reclaim military power and, once again, be a "great despotic monarch" (伟大的专制君主).

Therefore, we can state with absolute certainty that China's despotic rulers were perfectly aware that armed forces with ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征) possessed stronger combat effectiveness. They knew even better that this very combat effectiveness had the potential to destroy the despotic, centralized bureaucratic system itself.

Consequently, when facing external crises, they would consciously allow feudal elements to develop to a certain extent in order to utilize their military power to maintain their remnant empire. And the moment the external threat rapidly weakened, the court would immediately "slaughter the donkey after the millstone is done turning" (卸磨杀驴).

Meanwhile, China's ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级), under the prolonged suppression of the bureaucratic system, became increasingly debilitated. The fragmentation of land property rights and the social atomization (全社会的原子化) of the entire society made it even more difficult for the ***landlord class*** to bear military obligations.

Thus, we witness a ludicrous reality: even after the transition between the two Song dynasties, when China's despotic rulers faced overwhelmingly powerful external threats, they still thought of utilizing ***feudalized*** armed forces.

For example, while Emperor Xuanzong of Jin was deciding to flee south to Kaifeng, he enfeoffed nine ***feudal lords*** as dukes in the already out-of-control Hebei region, attempting to rely on them to block the aggressive spearhead of the Mongol invasion. In the precarious final years of the Ming Dynasty, there was no shortage of officials who consistently advocated for the early organization of local militias. Even the Hongguang regime—regarded as corrupt and incompetent to the extreme—attempted before its demise to grant greater autonomy to the Jiangbei military garrisons to emulate the precedent of the Southern Song.

However, by this time, China had deviated from the path of ***feudalization*** for far too long. It had become extremely difficult for people to even imagine the organizational form of a ***feudal society***. The increasingly consolidated bureaucratic society made it increasingly impossible to establish a ***superstructure*** (上层建筑) based on a feudal economy.

Even if the ***landlord class*** was bestowed with righteous titles and legitimacy (大义名分), they lacked the capacity to establish a reliable local administrative system in a short time and exert any military function.

Not to mention that, having entered the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** for so long, people had long grown accustomed to the court's treacherous practice of *"hiding the bow once the birds are shot, and boiling the hound once the hares are caught"* (鸟尽弓藏，兔死狗烹). Who would be foolish enough to genuinely believe the court possessed any credibility?

For the local separatist warlords, their expectation of the court's credibility was not necessarily higher than their expectation of the Manchus who were ***Entering the Pass*** (入关). This was particularly evident at the end of the Ming Dynasty.

Therefore, since the Song Dynasty, the despotic courts' attempts to temporarily release some feudal elements to seek a momentary, ignoble peace when left helpless against external military threats have all ended in utter failure.

Finally, what I especially want to say is this: when a contemporary Chinese citizen reconsiders the historical event of the Jingkang Incident, he must never forget that **the *true* humiliation lies in the fact that the commoners of the Song Dynasty (naturally including the *landlord class*) were utterly unable to master their own destiny under the oppression of emperors and bureaucrats—a gang of robbers, bandits, thieves, and fraudsters!**

When one slave-owner viciously beats another slave-owner and plunders his slaves, the true humiliation for the slave lies in the very fact of *being a slave*, not in being plundered as a slave to the other side. The latter is the humiliation of the slave-owner, and belongs in no way to the slave.

The humiliation of Jingkang has yet to be washed away! (靖康耻，犹未雪！)

4, A Feudalized China Would Possess a Massive Military Advantage Over Surrounding Regions

Having explained the three aforementioned aspects, some might still harbor doubts, arguing: although the elite armed forces of ***feudal lords***, centered around knights, possess extraordinary combat effectiveness, the direct demesnes (直辖领地) of lords in a ***feudalized*** society are ultimately limited. Meanwhile, along the incredibly long borderlines of China's massive territory, conquerors capable of mobilizing six-figure armies constantly emerge. Could the ***feudal system*** truly withstand such formidable martial power?

My answer consists of two points.

First, you inherently cannot demand a *feudal society* to solve problems that only a bureaucratic society is forced to face.

This is exactly what I stated previously: what the Chinese are most adept at is *solving problems that no one else has (which, in reality, means surface-level mitigation while fundamentally solving absolutely nothing)*.

Take the numerous conquerors the Chinese border has faced since the bureaucratic restoration. They were not supermen. Aside from Wanyan Aguda (完颜阿骨打), whose rise was indeed exceptionally rapid, it inherently required time for these conquerors to develop their regimes to the point of posing a significant threat to the Chinese Empire.

Piluoge (皮罗阁) did not unify the Six Zhao in a single day; Lê Lợi could not liberate Vietnam overnight; the Khitans coexisted with the Tang Dynasty for over two centuries; the Tanguts (党项人) served as the Dingnan Jiedushi for 150 years; Nurhaci had only 13 suits of armor when he initiated his uprising; and even Genghis Khan took 15 years to unify Mongolia.

An indisputable fact is that the reason the frontier situation of the Chinese Empire frequently deteriorated to an irremediable state was, in itself, the direct result of the ***bureaucratic state*** lacking response capabilities or simply "playing dead" (装死).

If the empire could genuinely mount effective responses, how much opportunity would these ethnic minority conquerors really have to snowball their power? That is highly questionable.

The superiority of the ***feudal system*** lies precisely in the fact that, when potential crises emerge on the borders, the ***feudal lords*** on the frontier would respond far more decisively and effectively than the circulating officials (*Liuguan* / 流官) of the court. This means that the massive ***barbarian*** armies the bureaucratic empire faced might never even appear on the borders of a feudal empire—**because they would likely have been strangled in the cradle long before.**

Second, you cannot assume that if China had genuinely embarked on the path of *feudalization*, it would forever remain in an early, immature state.

What ethnic minority conquerors would face would not be mere frontier warlords possessing only elements of ***feudalization*** *(or those who couldn't even be called genuine* ***feudal lords****)*. Instead, they would face massive feudal kingdoms—much like England and France in Europe—possessing tens of thousands of knights serving as retainers.

China's ***feudalization*** process began the earliest in the entire world. If it had been able to proceed normally, it would have easily reached the level of the ***High Middle Ages*** by at least 1000 AD. By this stage, the organizational and mobilization capabilities of a feudal state's army could absolutely not be considered inferior to those of a ***restoration-bureaucratic state***; in terms of combat effectiveness, there would be a qualitative leap.

It is precisely because China, in reality, embarked on an aberrant path (邪路) that people find it exceedingly difficult to imagine just how terrifyingly powerful a ***feudalized medieval*** China would be.

Our country's current territorial area is roughly equivalent to Europe, and historically, the population of ***Handi*** (***China Proper*** / 汉地) alone was slightly larger than Europe's. This means that a fully ***feudalized*** China in the ***High Middle Ages***—even counting only the territory within the Great Wall—would be a cultural ***community*** covering 4 million square kilometers with a population of hundreds of millions.

Estimating based on Japan, which has a similar agricultural **production mode** to China, this implies that China may possess millions of feudal samurai/warriors (上百万的封建武士) in the ***Late Middle Ages***, and China's military equipment would be even more highly sophisticated than in ***our timeline*** (本位面).

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties—the early phase of ***feudalization***—massive numbers of cataphracts (具装骑兵 / heavily armored cavalry) had already appeared in northern China. If ***feudalization*** had proceeded normally for another five centuries, what its armaments would have evolved into is simply beyond imagination.

Even if China were not in a unified state due to the ***feudalization*** process, judging from the geopolitical situation of China's interior, there would be, at most, five or six major regimes. Yet, the average population of *each* of these regimes would already be equivalent to ten times that of Mongolia when Genghis Khan just unified it.

Facing such a colossal China—bristling with castles, wielding millions of warriors, and armed to the teeth—even ten Genghis Khans would be left helplessly staring in despair.

The fact is, if China were truly ***feudalized***, the Chinese vassals would absolutely not be squatting behind the Great Wall or along the coastlines doing nothing; they would have expanded the borders outward long ago.

Judging from the actual historical trajectories of Eastern Europe and ***Central Asia*** converting to Orthodoxy and Islam respectively, by the second half of the 12th century when Genghis Khan was born, the Mongolian region at the eastern end of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** would have long since adopted the same religion as the Chinese interior. *(If China were feudalized, it would most likely adopt a religion suited to the requirements of the* ***feudalization*** *period; historically speaking, this should have been Buddhism).*

The nomads of the Mongolian region would highly likely be widely welcomed as mercenaries for the Chinese vassals. However, the astronomical chasm in scale between them and China would make it utterly impossible for them to achieve a successful ***Ru Guan*** (***Entering the Pass*** / 入关) like the nomadic tribes near ***the Middle East***.

Therefore, assuming China's ***feudalization*** continued normally, pondering whether China could defend against foreign invasions is fundamentally a meaningless question. Pondering *to what extent it could expand* is the only genuinely meaningful alternative history (架空) thought experiment.

The reason people today doubt a ***feudalized*** China's ability to cope with border threats is, in essence, because China historically never achieved a mature ***feudal society***. The ***bureaucratic state*** would only permit certain feudal elements to emerge for self-preservation when it consciously sensed impending doom; once its objective was achieved, it would immediately snuff them out. Under these conditions, the ***feudal society*** could never possibly reach maturity.

That the ***feudal society*** could not develop fully under the ***bureaucratic state*** is the crime of the ***bureaucratic state***, not the fault of the former.

Therefore, when we see the Nine Dukes of the Jin Dynasty (金朝的九公) swept away like dead leaves by the Mongols, or massive numbers of late Ming warlords surrendering to the Manchus, we must point out that **the true entity responsible for these debacles is the court itself!**

Since the despotic court never allowed the ***feudal landlord class*** to openly and honorably participate in political affairs as rulers, enjoy economic privileges, and bear military obligations, it should not expect regional warlords and landlord militias to miraculously rally to save the throne (勤王保驾) when imminent disaster strikes.

Nowhere in the world is there such a one-sidedly advantageous deal! (天下从来没有这么占尽便宜的事！)

5,The Need for Water Conservancy is by No Means the Rationale for Maintaining the restoration-bureaucratic state

Finally, I must clarify the myth surrounding the "water conservancy issue" (水利问题). Frankly speaking, this is entirely a theoretical illusion conjured out of thin air by certain Western scholars who lack a fundamental understanding of Chinese history. My verdict is unequivocal: the notion that "the practical necessity of water conservancy construction sustained the despotic ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家)" is a complete absurdity that fundamentally collapses under the scrutiny of historical logic.

First, the vast majority of water conservancy projects in ancient China fundamentally do not require the concentration of national power for their construction or maintenance. Under the ***productive force*** conditions of an agricultural society, it is already quite remarkable if a single water conservancy project can play a major role over an area equivalent to a single Chinese province. Take the Dujiangyan Irrigation System (都江堰) in my hometown for example: this was merely constructed by Li Bing (李冰), the Governor of Shu Commandery (*Shujun Taishou* 蜀郡太守) during the Qin Dynasty, along with his son, leading the local populace. Is the support of a highly centralized ***bureaucratic state*** truly necessary for this? There are also the Zhengguo Canal (郑国渠) and the Bai Canal (白渠) in the Guanzhong region (*Guanzhong* 关中); when actual construction began, the labor mobilized was merely that of the Guanzhong Plain. It is fundamentally impossible to argue that a ***feudal society*** would lack the capability to construct and maintain them. The Chengdu Plain and the Guanzhong Plain are only so large; even under a feudal system, could they really be fragmented into a dozen political entities? The fact is, as long as one is not completely

blind to Chinese history, one should know that the vast majority of famous water conservancy projects in our history were built by local nobles prior to the Qin Dynasty and by local officials after the Qin Dynasty; they absolutely did not necessitate the support of the central government. And these water conservancy projects organized and constructed at the provincial or municipal levels could absolutely be deemed "large-scale" in ancient times. For ordinary commoners, water conservancy facilities were even a concept confined within the scope of a single village (such as a hundred-meter-long irrigation ditch); how much manpower and material resources could that possibly require to mobilize?

Nowadays on the internet, people often like to exaggerate the large-scale armed brawls (械斗) that occurred between villages in the lineage/clan societies (*Zongzu* 宗族) of China (especially in the south) due to conflicts over water resources, in order to show that Chinese people possess martial virtue (*Wude* 武德). However, any level-headed person can point out that the scale of these armed brawls is only "large" when compared to ordinary fistfights; it does not mean that, if viewed as actual military combat, they were truly that shocking. The combined territorial scope of a few villages that frequently participated in such armed brawls would unlikely exceed the fiefdom of an Earl, let alone a Duke (of course, in Europe, the territorial gap between different ***feudal lords*** could be vast even if their ranks were the same; this is merely a broad generalization). Not to mention, armed brawls of this scale were also the product of the massive population growth and the intensification of the imbalance in the ***land-labor ratio*** (人地矛盾) after China was drawn into the ***early modern*** world; they were not events that occurred during the stage of ***feudal society***. (I did not express myself clearly here; what I actually mean to say is that the need for water conservancy construction in ancient China—specifically the need for a unified government's intervention—has been severely exaggerated.)

This implies that the vast majority of water conservancy projects that appeared in Chinese history posed no insurmountable obstacles for a ***feudal society*** in terms of manpower, material resources, and financial power. Furthermore, a ***feudal lord***'s willingness to develop the economy of his own fiefdom is significantly higher than that of a rotating official (*Liuguan* 流官) to earnestly govern his jurisdiction. What reason is there to believe that the former would not do a better job in water conservancy? (In fact, this point is quite obvious. As long as one travels in China for a while, basically anyone who isn't a fool can see that most ancient Chinese water conservancy projects that benefited agriculture and the people—such as the Mulan Weir (木兰陂) in Putian, Fujian—were primarily built by the ***Xiangshen*** (local scholar-elites / 地方士绅). With at most the assistance of the local government, they were entirely sufficient to complete the construction.)

Even in the China of ***our timeline*** (本位面), there is no shortage of examples where *feudalized* regional military governors (*Fanzhen* 藩镇) made outstanding contributions to water conservancy construction. For instance, the construction of the Qiantang River seawall by Qian Liu, the King of

Wuyue (吴越王钱镠), who evolved from a late-Tang Military Commissioner (*Jiedushi* 节度使), is extremely famous, and the beautiful legend of "King Qian Shooting the Tide" (钱王射潮) survives to this day.

On a global scale, people can equally easily name some world-renowned ancient water conservancy projects that were built and played major roles under low-technology conditions (not even reaching the level of the ***feudal era***) without relying on a large centralized state. These include the Marib Dam (马里卜大坝) in Yemen, the nearby Aflaj Irrigation Systems (法拉吉灌溉系统) in Oman, and Tenochtitlan (特诺奇蒂特兰), built by the Aztecs of the New World on an artificial island in Lake Texcoco, among others. The Maya were equally able to establish water resource management systems in the low-lying regions of northern Yucatán that lacked lakes and rivers, and they hardly even used metal tools.

The fact is, in agricultural societies prior to the Industrial Revolution, there was practically no demand whatsoever to construct colossal water conservancy projects that spanned multiple geographical units and functioned over an even vaster area. A feudal state was entirely capable of handling the water conservancy construction within its own borders.

Second, to reiterate an earlier point, one cannot demand that a ***feudal society*** fulfill needs that only exist within a ***bureaucratic state***. A mega-project spanning the entire country like the Grand Canal (大运河) was originally designed to serve the centralized capital of the ***bureaucratic state***; the significance of this canal in extracting the nation's wealth far outweighed its commercial significance for north-south transportation. China's massive grain transport system (*Caoyun* 漕运) began with the needs of military expansion during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝). At that time, grain from the Guandong (关东) region was transported upstream via the Yellow River, crossing an entire geographical step, and was then shipped to the capital via the transport canal connecting Chang'an (长安) and the Yellow River. If China had undergone a normal ***feudalization*** (封建化) process, this demand would naturally have vanished. The Lingqu Canal (灵渠) is another highly typical example. This type of mega-project, utilized by ***classical states*** to facilitate large-scale conquests, emerged in a specific historical period; however, in the early and middle stages of a ***feudal society***, the demand to construct it would fundamentally not exist. When the capital of the Roman Empire was still in Rome, the wealth of the entire Mediterranean world flowed towards Rome, but by the year 1000 CE, it was impossible for this to still be the case.

The floods of the Yellow River were likewise a man-made disaster caused by the ***bureaucratic state***. The Yellow River—an important river whose basin is almost entirely located within ***Handi*** (***China Proper*** / 汉地)—indeed generated a relatively significant need for flood control due to its

heavy silt content. However, this basic fact has been reduced to a smokescreen used by the ***bureaucratic state*** to cover up its incompetence and misdeeds. For nearly 1,000 years after Wang Jing (王景) tamed the Yellow River during the Eastern Han Dynasty, the river experienced no major breaches. Breaches began to appear again from the first half of the 11th century CE. Initially, they did not cause much actual damage. However, in 1048, the Yellow River breached again at Shanghusao (商胡埽). The result of this flooding was the formation of two branches in the lower reaches of the Yellow River: the branch known as the "Eastern Flow" (东流) at least remained within the territory of the Song Dynasty, but the "Northern Flow" (北流) surged all the way north into the final stretch of the Haihe River (海河), emptying into the sea at the border between the Song and the Liao (辽) dynasties.

The Song court felt anxious about this because, having failed to recover the crucial barrier of the Yanshan Mountains (燕山), the entire North China Plain was left in a defenseless state. The only geographical barrier that could afford the Song rulers any psychological sense of security was nothing other than the Yellow River. Now that the Yellow River was flowing further north, the decision-makers of the Song Empire believed their defensive system in the north had been compromised. For a bloated ***bureaucratic state***, rather than expecting itself to adjust its rigid national defense strategy, it was simpler to just try blocking the Northern Flow altogether. Thus, during the reigns of Emperors Renzong (仁宗), Shenzong (神宗), and Zhezong (哲宗), the Northern Song court attempted three times to forcibly block the Northern Flow. Not only did they expend immense manpower and material resources without success, but each attempt also resulted in breaches that brought catastrophic loss of life and property to the people.

During the Song-Jin Wars, Song military commanders, in order to rely on the water's momentum to stop the Jin (金) troops from advancing south, deliberately breached the Yellow River dikes, causing the river to change course southward. This formed a long-term situation where the Yellow River seized the path of the Huai River to enter the sea (夺淮入海). By the end of the 12th century, the Northern Flow was completely cut off. When the Mongol army (蒙古军队) marched south in 1234, they once again utilized the Yellow River to stage the "spectacle" of using water as a substitute for soldiers through artificial breaching.

Since the Yellow River flowed south and seized the Huai, it remained extremely unstable. Although, generally speaking, it ultimately emptied into the sea from the estuary of the Huai River, it was hard to say exactly where it split into several branches to enter the Huai River channel, because a single breach could alter its course once again. It was not until Pan Jixun (潘季驯) tamed the Yellow River in the late Ming Dynasty that the southern flow was fixed in place for 300 years. However, ever since the Yellow River long-termly seized the Huai River to enter the sea, floods of the Yellow

River became extremely frequent, bringing incalculable harm to the people of the Yellow and Huai river regions.

The continuous and severe flooding caused by the Yellow River's southward invasion into the Huai River basin possessed an element of inevitability. Throughout most of its recorded history, the Yellow River had entered the sea via the North China Plain; its long-term southward flow was originally an abnormal phenomenon caused by human intervention. Viewed solely from the perspective of water resource distribution, it was also highly irrational: the North China Plain was already more deficient in water compared to the Huai River basin. The southward flow deprived an initially water-deficient region of a major river, while forcing the relatively well-watered Huai River (and its tributaries) to bear the extra water volume of the entire Yellow River using its original channels. It would have been a miracle if this did not render the river defenses highly precarious.

The Yangtze-Huai River basin natively experiences the "plum rain" season (梅雨季); during June and July, there are often continuous, uninterrupted rains lasting for dozens of days. The *Huai'an Fu Zhi* (Gazetteer of Huai'an Prefecture) [淮安府志], compiled during the Qianlong era (乾隆年) of the Qing Dynasty, records: *"Since the mid-Ming Dynasty, whenever the Huai River swells, the west wind whips up the waves, and the white crests tower like mountains. Across the hundreds of li (里) of Huai'an and Yangzhou, both public officials and private citizens are in a state of terror, and no one dares to sleep peacefully. This has been the case for hundreds of years"* (自明中叶以来，每淮水盛时，西风激浪，白波如山，淮扬数百里，公私惶惶，莫敢安枕者，数百年矣). This vividly illustrates the immense pressure on river defenses during the flood season each year.

Yet, if this was the case, why not allow the Yellow River to revert to its northern flow? In fact, before it finally changed course and once again emptied into the Bohai Sea (渤海) in 1855, the Yellow River naturally breached its dikes northward and re-emerged with northern branches several times during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. However, the reaction of the imperial court was invariably and resolutely to block the northern flow to death.

This question is precisely the key to understanding the floods of the Yellow River in China. The answer is: although the southward flow of the Yellow River would cause the deaths of millions, if not tens of millions of commoners, it was advantageous for the grain transport system (*Caoyun* 漕运) destined for the capital, Beijing (北京). This was because the Yellow River—already carrying a heavy load of silt—frequently changed its course across the flat terrain of the North China Plain. Consequently, the channels of the Yellow River on the North China Plain were extremely shallow, later even turning into an "elevated river" (地上悬河) flowing above the surrounding ground. If the Grand Canal intersected the Yellow River at this location, it would be extremely easy for the canal to become clogged with silt and rendered unusable in a very short period.

If we observe the Sui-Tang Grand Canal (隋唐大运河) along the Yellow River from west to east, it is not difficult to discover that the Yongji Canal (永济渠) extending northeast to Zhuojun (涿郡) and the Tongji Canal (通济渠) extending southeast to Xuyi (盱眙) looked like two branches extending outward from the junction of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. In other words, the location where the Sui-Tang Grand Canal intersected with the Yellow River deliberately avoided the downstream region on the North China Plain where the river channels were shallower.

Later, after the Yellow River restored its northern flow in 1855—namely, emptying into the sea along its present course—the Qing government installed ship locks at the intersection of the Yellow River and the northern end of the canal for navigation. However, true to expectations, the canal was very quickly choked with silt until it was unusable. By that time, Western science and technology had been introduced, and the efficiency of maritime transport had thoroughly crushed inland river navigation. Successive governments no longer attempted to restore the canal's passage across the Yellow River; even today, the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal (京杭大运河) remains disconnected where it approaches the Yellow River.

Presently, with the assistance of modern science and technology, China's South-to-North Water Diversion Project (南水北调工程) has been able to allow the diverted water to pass *beneath* the riverbed of the Yellow River (which is already an elevated river)—this is what the Chinese government refers to as the "River-Crossing Project" (穿黄工程). However, let alone attempting to make the Grand Canal cross the Yellow River again (even if just for tourism purposes), not even the lower reaches of the Yellow River have achieved navigability. Therefore, if the Yellow River did not flow south, even if the Chinese empire later moved its capital to Beijing rather than residing in Chang'an or Luoyang, to construct a canal from Jiangnan (江南) to Beijing, they would probably still have had to conform to the shape of the Sui-Tang Grand Canal.

However, a dramatic turn of events occurred: the Yellow River usurped the path of the Huai River and entered the sea southward. Although making the Yellow River flow south was initially clearly not intended for the grain transport system (*Caoyun* 漕运), but was merely a clumsy blunder by the Song people, the imperial court soon realized a crucial point. The Yellow River's change of course made it possible for the canal to cross the lower reaches of the Yellow River, thereby providing the precondition for the straightening and shortening of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal (京杭大运河).

This was because, although the runoff volume of the Huai River was somewhat smaller than that of the Yellow River, over a long period, the channel of the Huai River remained quite stable, and the Huai River itself carried a small amount of silt. Therefore, the riverbed of the Huai River had been scoured relatively deep. When the massive water volume of the Yellow River poured in, the

distance from the riverbed to the water's surface became even deeper. Under these conditions, the Grand Canal could naturally cross the Yellow River without impacting grain transport. This is why, despite the massive disasters the Yellow River's southward flow brought to the commoners on both banks, the imperial court consistently viewed it as a benefit, terrified lest the Yellow River flow north again.

In fact, we must point out that, as long as no threat is posed to its existence, a ***bureaucratic state*** absolutely does not care about the life or death of commoners living thousands of *li* away from the capital. The southward flow of the Yellow River indeed likely exacerbated droughts in Zhili (直隶) and Shandong (山东), leaving the commoners living along the Yellow and Huai rivers under the constant threat of death year after year. But what did this matter to the emperor and the bureaucrats in Beijing? In their eyes, how could the lives of a few million commoners possibly be more important than the grain and wealth transported to Beijing? If we search through the historical materials of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it is not difficult to notice that when there are records of Yellow-Huai flooding, the importance of grain transport is placed far ahead of the lives of the people. In many cases, there are only records of "damage to the transport canal" (坏漕渠); exactly what kind of losses the commoners suffered goes completely unrecorded.

If people harbor any doubts regarding the attitude adopted by the Chinese empire in managing the Yellow River, my suggestion is to directly read Chapters 59 and 60 of the *Ming Shi* (History of Ming) [明史]. These two sections belong precisely to the *Treatise on the Yellow River* (黄河志), and the kinds of interest calculations the imperial court engaged in are manifested with crystal clarity therein. For example, in Chapter 59, the remonstrance of Tu Sheng (涂升), an Investigating Censor in Henan, states it very plainly: *"When the Yellow River causes a disaster, a southern breach afflicts Henan, and a northern breach afflicts Shandong. In the past, during the Han Dynasty, it breached at Suanzao and again at Huzi; during the Song Dynasty, it breached at Guantao and again at Chanzhou; during the Yuan Dynasty, it breached at Bianliang and again at Pukou. However, because the Han capital was in Guanzhong and the Song capital was in Daliang, the disaster caused by a river breach only affected a few commanderies bordering the river. Today, the capital relies entirely on the Huitong Canal for the annual transport of millions of shi of grain; if the river breaches to the north, it will become a massive worry for grain transport"* (黄河为患，南决病河南，北决病山东。昔汉决酸枣，复决瓠子；宋决馆陶，复决澶州；元决汴梁，复决蒲口。然汉都关中，宋都大梁，河决为患，不过濒河数郡而已。今京师专藉会通河岁漕粟数百万石，河决而北，则大为漕忧). Whether the Yellow River breached south or north, how many commoners died was a trivial matter; the urgent priority was that the Yellow River must not be allowed to flow north, for then grain transport would become a problem.

That a northern flow of the Yellow River was beneficial for the stability of the river channel and advantageous for the commoners of the realm was never a secret in China; the rulers and the high-

level intellectuals knew this perfectly well in their hearts. Hu Wei (胡渭), an expert in classical studies (*Jingxuejia* 经学家) and geographer of the early Qing Dynasty, recorded the commentary of the Yuan Dynasty official Yu Que (余阙) in the second half of Chapter 13 of his work *Yugong Zhuizhi* (A Pointed Investigation of the Tribute of Yu) [禹贡锥指]: *"[Yu Que] said: The land in the south is originally higher than in the north; thus, moving the river south is difficult, while moving it north is easy... Why must we exhaust labor and wealth year after year to prevent a northern breach?"* (余阙曰：南方之地本高于北，河之南徙难而北徙易…奚必岁岁劳费防其北决邪？). One must realize that at that time, the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal had only been fully connected for a few years in total. Even Baidu Baike (百度百科), which has always been notorious in China for its poor quality of information, straightforwardly admits that the so-called water disasters of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties were fundamentally a political disaster that persisted for six centuries, rather than something that could be shirked off as natural disasters.

In the eyes of the officials responsible for river affairs, the commoners on both banks were naturally not worth mentioning compared to grain transport. For example, Pan Jixun (潘季驯), the famous water management official of the Ming Dynasty, once said, *"It is a situation of mutual causality: if the Huai is afflicted, then the Yellow River is afflicted; if the Yellow River is afflicted, then the grain transport is also afflicted"* (是淮病而黄病，黄病而漕亦病，相因之势也). As for the "affliction of the commoners," it was simply omitted. One absolutely cannot blame Pan Jixun for saying this. Chinese people always possess an inexplicable filter regarding so-called "virtuous officials" and "capable ministers." In reality, however, as long as they are bureaucrats, their power derives from their superiors, so they must inevitably be responsible to their superiors. On this point, there will be absolutely no difference between Yan Song (严嵩) and Hai Rui (海瑞). The ones who held the fate of the river affairs officials in their hands were the emperors, not the commoners on the two banks; therefore, they had no choice but to place the grain transport upon which the emperor relied ahead of the life and death of the commoners.

A fact that might profoundly shock foreigners is that, despite our country repeatedly trumpeting the "great significance" of the Grand Canal at the official level—constructing numerous museums themed around it nationwide, alongside top-tier (5A) tourist attractions centered on its landscapes, and even successfully registering it as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2014—the cruel essence of the Grand Canal as a "river of blood and tears" is hardly a secret, even in mainland China today.

Not only can the official histories, such as the *Yuan Shi* (History of Yuan) [元史] and the *Ming Shi* (History of Ming) [明史], be publicly accessed, but important academic works relating to China's history of water conservancy—which directly point out that the floods of the Yellow River during the late Chinese Empire were primarily man-made political disasters—are also not banned books.

For instance, the *Huanghe Bianqian Shi* (History of the Transformations of the Yellow River) [黄河变迁史], authored by the Chinese historian Cen Zhongmian (岑仲勉) in the last century, remains available.

Tianxia Changhe (The Long River) [天下长河], a 2022 mainland Chinese television drama praising the water management achievements during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (康熙) of the Qing Dynasty, features a highly thought-provoking scene: Emperor Kangxi looks at three pieces of paper posted on the wall, each inscribed with an affair of state that weighs heavily on his mind. The paper in the middle reads "Grain Transport" (*Caoyun* 漕运), the paper on the left reads "River Affairs" (*Hewu* 河务), and the paper on the right reads "The Three Feudatories" (*Sanfan* 三藩). The order in which these three pieces of paper are arranged perfectly reflects the degree of importance of these three matters in the eyes of Emperor Kangxi. It hints even more dramatically at one point: when the empire always prioritizes grain transport over river affairs, it is forever impossible to make the Yellow River run clear and the seas calm. We cannot know whether this scene was intentionally crafted by the drama's director and screenwriters, but it obviously reflects that, even today, there are plenty of Chinese intellectuals who clearly understand the true essence of the so-called "management of the Yellow River" in the late Chinese Empire.

Therefore, the assertion that the need for flood control was the driving factor for the state to strengthen the bureaucratic system is an argument with its cause and effect completely inverted. We should straightforwardly point out that it is precisely the ***bureaucratic state***'s utter disregard for human life, its absolute obedience to superiors, its corrupt incompetence, and its grandiose posturing (好大喜功) that artificially magnified the various so-called "natural disasters" across the Chinese land. The Banqiao Dam Failure (板桥水库溃决) of 1975 is a relatively recent, typical example of this. Thus, there is absolutely no such thing as "water conservancy forging the empire." Quite the contrary: it was precisely to maintain the already existing ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** (复辟官僚帝国) that the entire Chinese society was forced to inject such staggering investments into water conservancy and sacrifice so much in vain.

Returning to the Yellow River: it is highly ironic that, because the silt content of the Yellow River was truly so massive, on the eve of China being forced to open its doors, even the riverbed of the Huai River had already been drastically elevated by sediment deposition. By the Qing Dynasty, in order to allow boats on the Grand Canal to normally cross the Yellow River, people had no choice but to construct increasingly complex auxiliary channels at the junction of the two. Looking at it on a map, it resembled nothing so much as a heart densely propped up by scaffolding. Yet, even so, it merely treated the symptoms and not the disease; by the end of the Qianlong reign, it was only a matter of time before the southward-flowing Yellow River choked the canal's navigation. Instead, it was the science and technology brought by Western ironclads and cannons that finally liberated the Chinese people from this "Canal Prison" (运河监狱).

The so-called water conservancy enterprises of the late Chinese Empire were, in essence, merely a microcosm of a behemoth with feet of clay—trapped in a dead end—struggling day after day toward its own demise. The entire system did not hesitate to force the people to pay any sacrifice, solely to remain stable on its original track for a few more days, but ultimately, it could not ensure its longevity and was doomed to perish. If one contemplates the following hypothesis—namely, if China had continually avoided contact with the West, where would it have headed during the late Qing Dynasty under the circumstances of an ecological collapse in the north and the canal completely losing its function? Could Beijing have still served as the capital of an autocratic empire? I believe the answer to this would be extremely intriguing.

Third, as emphasized previously, without the suppression of the ***bureaucratic state***, China's process of ***feudalization*** (封建化) naturally would not have stalled at the primary stage but would have continued to develop. Therefore, we cannot assume that a *feudalized* China would permanently possess only the public works construction capacity of the ***Early Middle Ages***. Looking at the situation in Europe, starting from the ***High Middle Ages***, feudal states already possessed the capability to construct large-scale public works. Even regarding water conservancy projects, there is the example of the Netherlands region constructing massive seawalls starting from the 10th century.

The power that an ***early modern society*** (近世社会) could mobilize after the end of the ***feudal period*** was even more formidable. On a global scale, perhaps the most representative example is the construction of Edo by the Tokugawa Shogunate (*Tokugawa Bakufu* 徳川幕府). The shogunate thoroughly tamed the raging rivers on the Kanto Plain and, in just a century, transformed Edo into the largest city in the world. Such an achievement was made, moreover, in a narrow, isolationist island nation. During the same period, ***Absolutist*** Europe was also experiencing a time when water conservancy projects were in full swing, and the completion of numerous canals serves as powerful proof.

If China's ***feudalization*** had continued normally, estimating from the fact that our country's ***feudalization*** began relatively early (the trend of ***feudalization*** was already highly apparent by the late Eastern Han Dynasty), a feudal China would have ended its typical feudal class society and begun transitioning into an ***early modern state*** (近世国家) by the time of the Yuan Dynasty in ***our timeline*** (本位面) at the latest—which is exactly when the current Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal was built. Therefore, we have every reason to believe that if an ***early modern*** China, having undergone the process of ***feudalization***, wanted to construct the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, it would absolutely not have lacked the power to do so—and could even have done it much better.

Fourth, even if there exists a massive demand for construction in flood control and water conservancy projects, whether this would inevitably produce a stable bureaucratic order like that of China remains questionable. In the tropical regions further south than China, there are no relatively

distinct four seasons as there are in China's ***Zhongyuan*** (***The Central Plains*** / 中原); instead, there is only the distinction between wet and dry seasons. The manifestations of floods and droughts are far more extreme. There is no reason to believe that the demand for large-scale public water conservancy facilities in these regions was any smaller than in China.

For example, we can clearly point out that the Khmer Empire (高棉帝国), which was in the ***classical period*** (古典时期), obviously relied heavily on water conservancy projects. This is highly evident from the number of large-scale reservoirs near Angkor. However, the God-Kings of Khmer accomplished this by integrating water conservancy construction into the sacred aura generated by massive religious architectural complexes. As for Khmer's own ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制), it was pathetically weak. This empire did not even have a decent law of succession; out of a total of twenty-six God-Kings, only eight inherited the throne from their brothers or fathers.

Medieval (中世纪的) India likewise relied on the power of religion when carrying out large-scale water conservancy construction. The magnificent stepwells (阶梯井) widely found across India are powerful proof. From a practical standpoint, although stepwells were used to store water sources during the dry season, the religious atmosphere expressed by their colossal scale and exquisite sculptural art would undoubtedly leave believers awestruck.

In the vast Islamic world across the Eurasian continent, an arid or semi-arid environment is the norm of life. The local agriculture's reliance on irrigation is obviously something that the regions inside China's Great Wall (长城以内)—with an average annual precipitation of over 400 millimeters—simply cannot compare to. However, one can clearly see that even though ***medieval*** Muslim monarchs were visibly more autocratic than their European counterparts, compared to the emperors of China, their autocracy was simply child's play. This is because Islamic society accomplished social organization in various settlements centered around mosques through the clerical class. The clerics played a leading and arbitrating role in the construction and maintenance of water conservancy facilities, as well as the distribution and use of water resources. By exerting this function, they conversely further consolidated their social status; therefore, the entire society fundamentally did not need a tremendously powerful bureaucratic system.

If one notes modern Iran, currently ruled by a theocratic government where religion and state are unified, it is precisely a civilization of antiquity that is overall highly arid, possesses an extremely long history of irrigation agriculture, and currently follows the Islamic faith. Therefore, through such observation, it is not difficult to draw a conclusion: even if a regime or civilization from the ***classical period*** to the ***Middle Ages*** possessed a highly intense practical need to construct large-scale public water facilities, its reaction would most likely be to seek assistance from religion (of course, this does not rule out its political need for centralization; it is just that history outside of

China demonstrates that cooperation between a feudal regime and religious organizations was entirely adequate for the needs of water conservancy construction and maintenance in that era).

If we recall the reaction of Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝) when facing severe floods, it is easy to remember that even the Chinese empire of that era relied on the assistance of religion. Whether it was counting on the magic of the *fangshi* (esoteric practitioners / 方士) to quell the floods, or erecting palaces at the breach of the Yellow River to suppress the disaster, these were fundamentally religious acts. It was merely that the formidable state capacity of the Han Empire meant it no longer needed religion to issue a rallying cry when taking concrete actions to resolve the floods (though it was not entirely unneeded; for example, right before Emperor Wu personally went to Huzi (瓠子) to command the blocking of the Yellow River breach, he had just returned from completing the Fengshan sacrifices at Mount Tai (泰山封禅), which in itself generated a religious aura).

Moreover, in regions outside of China, one can indeed point out certain highly autocratic and centralized ancient regimes that constructed massive water conservancy projects under the will and organization of the government, such as Ancient Egypt and the Inca Empire. However, upon careful reflection, one discovers that these regimes inherently relied heavily on the inspirational power of religion. The Pharaohs not only possessed divinity themselves but also cooperated with the priests, while the Inca royal family simply claimed to be the descendants of the Sun God.

We must point out that "de-religionization" (去宗教化) itself is a prominent characteristic of the Chinese empire since the bureaucratic restoration. This point is reflected in all aspects of society, ranging from the decline of religious organizations in China's interior to the shifts in the sources of regime legitimacy. The dramatic decline in the influence of religion on social construction was originally a highly crucial cross-section of what academia calls the "Tang-Song Transition" (唐宋变革); it was the inevitable outcome brought about during the formation and consolidation of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state***. The bureaucratic system of the restored Chinese empire harbored an extreme hatred for religions competing with it for local control; otherwise, the persecutions of Buddhism by the Three Wus and One Zong (三武一宗灭佛) would never have occurred. Therefore, during the timeframe when ***feudal relations of production*** (封建生产关系) functioned as the mainstream, it is hard to say there was any strong causal relationship between the massive demand to construct large-scale public water facilities and the formation and maintenance of a powerful bureaucratic system. This theory is absurd.

Nevertheless, readers who pursue rigor can still point out the error in the title of this section. Admittedly, I have already explained that the demand for water conservancy is not the reason for the maintenance of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家), but the ***restoration-***

bureaucratic system (复辟官僚制度) is not limited to the territory of present-day China. If we turn our gaze to Vietnam, which gained independence from China, then the demand for water conservancy is indeed, to a certain extent, a reason for the maintenance of Vietnam's ***restoration-bureaucratic state***. Vietnam's ruling core, the Red River Delta [红河平原], has perpetually suffered from floods. This is because the annual runoff of the tropical Red River is greater than that of the Yellow River; its upper reaches feature steep terrain, causing precipitation to converge extremely rapidly, and the water contains a high content of sediment *(which is also the reason it is named the Red River)*, compounded by the fact that it is prone to typhoon strikes in the summer. Although the Red River Delta is not large in area, as the cornerstone of Vietnamese rule, its physical geographical conditions inevitably profoundly influenced Vietnamese society. In fact, we indeed see that several dynasties in Vietnam after its independence from China had been actively managing the Red River floods, and even institutionalized water control through the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** inherited from China. Therefore, we can indeed say that in Vietnam, the demand for water conservancy, to a certain extent, consolidated the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** it inherited from China.

However, this absolutely does not mean that assuming Vietnam had never been influenced by China in its history, the Red River Delta would have spontaneously formed a ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** similar to China's. In the final analysis, what Vietnam inherited from China was a bureaucratic system evolved from the **wartime system** (战时体制) adopted by an empire with a population of tens of millions and an area of millions of square kilometers when conducting large-scale wars; relying on Vietnam's own sheer scale, it would be impossible for such a system to evolve. If we observe the Kanto Plain [关东平原] in Japan and the Netherlands [尼德兰] in Western Europe, both of which experienced a complete ***feudal society*** (封建社会), it is not difficult to find that the regional area with water conservancy demands there is no smaller than the Red River Delta. But under a state of relatively independent evolution, they both began preliminary management during the ***Middle Ages*** (中世纪), and by the ***early modern period*** (近世), they achieved large-scale transformation of the entire region, largely conquering the floods. Myanmar, not far from Vietnam, is a state established by ethnic groups migrating south from within China's borders; when they conquered the middle Irrawaddy River valley, they might have also brought along northern engineering techniques, organizational methods, and political concepts. The state of Myanmar took the arid region of Upper Myanmar as its ruling core and constructed a massive number of water conservancy projects there. But even so, Myanmar did not form a ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** similar to that of China. Most obviously, its public social services relied on the participation of Theravada Buddhism [上座部佛教], whereas a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** is highly exclusionary toward religious participation in social governance. **Therefore, if Vietnam could have developed completely independently from the very beginning without being influenced by China at all, the *restoration-bureaucratic system* would not have spontaneously appeared in Vietnam.**

Thus, to my own surprise, I have used such a massive amount of space to complete a matter that I initially thought would only require a brief explanation to be accomplished. But writing more has its benefits: I have now thoroughly refuted the two primary theories the current academic community uses to defend the ***bureaucratic system of China's restoration period***. As for the rest, they are not even worth refuting. Writing in greater detail is precisely what ought to be done, so long as it can drive the final nail into the coffin of this demon that has ravaged for 14 centuries.

Chapter 8: Religion, Two Types of Efficiency, World War II, and the Korean War

This chapter aligns more closely with a miscellany in its genre. It does not proffer an abundance of new research conclusions; in essence, it constitutes a systematic reflection on the numerous entrenched concepts I had previously formed under the influence of official propaganda, undertaken after I had established my fundamental theoretical framework in 2022.

During the first half of 2023, while I was already agonizing over my graduation project, real life dealt me another heavy blow. I was forced to personally witness, at the microscopic level of the family, decisions that were just as absurd, anti-commonsense, and incomprehensible as those occurring in the macro-society. At a moment when even the most rudimentary media outlets could clearly discern the overarching trends, I tragically discovered this reality: people would rather entrust their faith to deceitful illusions harboring malicious intent than heed the desperate, rational, and fact-based warnings of their closest kin. Any attempt to point out the absurdity of their choices was met with nothing but arrogance and profound insults from my elders.

From that moment onward, I retreated deeply into my own inner world, striving to minimize the entanglements with my family. In this asphyxiating environment, these grand historical and sociological contemplations were no longer pursued solely out of a passion for truth; they increasingly became my sole spiritual pillar against the collapse of my reality. It was only within these cold, logical deductions that I could still feel my existence and value as a "human being," proving that I was not the worthless entity my immediate surroundings sought to define me as.

1, Religion Played a Crucial, Positive Role in Human History, Especially in Early Feudal Society

Over the past six months, if you asked me which concept I have experienced the most drastic paradigm shift regarding, it would undoubtedly be religion.

In China's official propaganda, although religion might not be explicitly denounced on the surface, people can distinctly sense that religion occupies the role of the antagonist in China's historical and political narratives. The government tirelessly propagandizes to the people: *If religion lacks the leadership of the Party, it bears no essential difference from an evil cult.*

Growing up in such a public opinion environment, even if people do not actively despise religion, they absolutely lack any genuine understanding of it—because there are simply no opportunities to understand it.

For me personally, I must admit that even before 2022, I generally held a negative attitude towards religion. Today, however, I hold a positive attitude towards the role it played during historical periods. This is primarily because I have realized a kind of **"universal rationality"** (普遍的合理

性)—meaning that when a social phenomenon appears universally across the globe, the factors driving its emergence absolutely cannot be isolated, regional, or accidental.

Take, for instance, the Eurasian Great Migration during the ***feudalization*** period that I mentioned earlier. This historical event, which occurred universally across a region spanning nearly ten thousand kilometers from east to west across the Eurasian continent, had a projection in China that we refer to as the *Uprising of the Five Barbarians* (五胡乱华).

In our country's prevailing historical narrative, the cause of the *Uprising of the Five Barbarians* is overwhelmingly attributed to the incompetence of the Sima clan (司马氏). A slightly more materialist explanation might specifically point to imperial clan policies or the rise of the **aristocratic great clans** (门阀士族). Meanwhile, the idealist explanation outright attributes it to the karmic retribution brought upon the Sima family for their treacherous, flip-flopping actions when usurping the Cao Wei regime.

To anyone educated in modern science, this viewpoint is so absurd that it is essentially **"not even wrong"**—yet astonishingly, it commands such a massive market in China.

The most ridiculous part is that you almost never see Chinese people pondering this simple question: *If karmic retribution truly exists, why did it only fall upon the head of the Sima family? Among the monarchs and bureaucrats of the Chinese Empire, how many did NOT deserve karmic retribution?*

From that moment, I could clearly recognize that a universally occurring historical event across the globe (like the Great Migration) simply cannot be explained merely by the moral failings of a few individuals. For example, I can now clearly point out that the various phenomena during the Western Jin Dynasty—whether the inward migration of ethnic minorities, the granting of immense power to imperial princes, or the increasingly prominent role played by the **aristocratic great clans** in politics—were essentially just the diverse societal impacts produced by the development of the ***feudalization*** process. As for the actual political or moral caliber of the Sima rulers, in the long run, it exerted no substantial impact on the historical trajectory of the late Jin period.

Therefore, when I reconsidered religion, I discovered that since world religions spread universally during the early stages of ***feudalization*** in various regions, and almost every region's ***feudalization*** across the globe had to bind itself to a religion, the force supporting the birth and spread of religion —compelling the masses to convert—must have been a universal social necessity shared by the entire world.

Under these circumstances, the simplistic assertion that *"religion is the opium of the people"* is far too arbitrary and dogmatic.

Narcotics indeed cause addiction and inflict immense harm upon the human body, but they are fundamentally something you can live a perfectly normal life without. Can something upon which a person relies for survival truly be considered a narcotic?

Just as in the modern world, almost all living organisms (except for certain microorganisms) universally require oxygen to survive; yet, oxidation does indeed cause living bodies to continuously age. If someone were to claim: *"Oxygen is a slow-acting poison that eventually causes human death over 70 to 100 years,"* would this statement not be utterly bizarre?

It is true that in ***modern society***, religion no longer plays the critical role of holding the social structure together. Citizens of ***modern societies*** can live perfectly well relying on adequate scientific literacy without depending on any religion. However, these modern facts cannot negate the colossal role religion once played during historical periods.

Religion was born from humanity's contemplation of the inevitable questions encountered in life. Most of these questions possess universality—such as life and death—while the rest are at least communally faced within a specific regional environment. This is precisely why religions hold the potential to be widely believed.

What is truly extraordinary is that in antiquity—especially during the early era of ***feudalization*** when the ***communities*** upon which people relied for survival had regressed to their smallest units—religion and religious organizations played the crucial role of maintaining circulation beyond mere economic demands, as well as sustaining technological investment and requirements.

Devotees endure unimaginable hardships to make pilgrimages to holy lands not for economic gain. Mendicant preachers travel tens of thousands of miles to foreign lands to propagate the faith, bringing with them far more than just the religion itself. Believers and religious institutions offer relief to the destitute, knowing full well it is difficult to reap any economic return.

To spread religious thought, people in backward regions attempt to comprehend, and even invent, their own written scripts. To construct magnificent religious edifices, religious organizations demand the most advanced—even entirely new—engineering and mathematics. To defend their sects in debates, people rigorously study logic and rhetoric.

(Of course, we must not forget the point mentioned in the previous section regarding religious support for massive water conservancy projects).

Even setting aside religion's role in constructing ***medieval society***, it essentially functioned as a **"safety net"** (兜底) for human society. That is to say, it ensured that even in a ***feudal society*** where ***social surplus*** (社会剩余) was relatively low and connections between regions were fragile, the ***social surplus*** could still achieve a certain degree of integration. It ensured that social

contradictions would not become overly intensified, and that technological progress and dissemination could maintain a certain scale. Viewed across the entirety of human history, this function has been exceptionally colossal.

When the society of the early ***feudalization*** period collapsed into myriad ***micro-communities*** due to shifts in the ***economic base*** (经济基础), people utilized *ideas*—rather than visible, predictable immediate interests—to forge a vastly larger ***community***. This transcendental ***community*** exceeded the land a person could measure with their feet, surpassed the territory a nation could rule, and shattered the boundaries that political power could reach.

Religion acted as a brake, halting the continued disintegration of the social structure, and provided vital spiritual support for people terrified and unnerved amid catastrophic upheaval.

When reading Japanese history previously, I felt this latter point particularly profoundly. For two centuries, intellectuals of the late Heian period clearly sensed that the ***feudalization*** process was disintegrating the original dynastic state. They had no idea where the path forward lay; fear and profound disorientation popularized the notion that Japan was on the verge of—or had already entered—the *Mappō* (Latter Day of the Law / 末法时代).

During the tumultuous years surrounding the Genpei War (源平合战), the entire archipelago society was battered by the chaos of war, and ordinary commoners began to grow deeply anxious. In an era that could be described as arduous for all strata of Japan, Buddhism played a bedrock role in inspiring people to regain their confidence.

Whether it was through massive engineering projects like the reconstruction of Tōdai-ji (东大寺), or the fact that the founders of Kamakura Buddhism ceased viewing the "spiritual protection of the state for the rulers" (镇护国家) as their sole enterprise and turned their focus instead toward the spiritual world of the myriad commoners—it all helped people survive those grueling times. Ultimately, this forged the *Giri* (duty and obligation / 义理) of Japanese ***feudal society***, with Buddhism and Shintoism as its cornerstones.

The reason such a monumental achievement is easily overlooked is precisely because, in the past, people were unaccustomed to utilizing comparative history on a global scale.

As long as one contrasts the ***medieval societies*** of Europe and Japan with the society of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic period***, the success and failure become glaringly obvious.

In our country, it is virtually impossible for the ***surplus of social production*** to be used to expand production or make investments; it is entirely consumed by the bureaucratic system. The people are

stripped of the capacity to organize at the grassroots level, and the court intentionally sabotages any potential for such unity. Spiritually, the entire nation has already collapsed—a point that needs no explanation, and defies explanation; anyone who has personally experienced it naturally knows.

If one has not lived in Chinese society for a prolonged period, it is absolutely impossible for them to grasp, through mere imagination, just how profoundly evil human beings can become.

There is an excellent, famous saying on the Chinese internet: *What the Chinese are most adept at is judging exactly who is weak and can be bullied with impunity, and exactly who cannot be bullied, before whom they can only kneel and endure being bullied.*

Over the past six months, I have gradually come to realize one thing: **virtually everything that a *restoration-bureaucratic state* fears and suppresses is precisely what is genuinely beneficial to the people.**

Because any action that allows grassroots power to expand—whether materially, organizationally, or spiritually—will inevitably weaken the ***bureaucratic state***, which is essentially a "prison of nations" (各民族监狱).

Therefore, when the ***bureaucratic state*** was restored in China from the Sui and Tang Dynasties onward, it was perfectly normal for various religions led by Buddhism—including Christianity introduced after contact with the West—to be treated with intense hostility in China.

People must consider what religion once meant to us from the perspective of the existence of an **"alternative possibility."** What has occurred in our country has proven that human beings are exactly this kind of animal: clever enough to possess the power to destroy themselves, yet foolish enough to lack the capacity to reliably control this power.

Suppose that, around the beginning of ***feudalization***, human society had never witnessed the emergence of world religions that spread so widely in actual history. *(I wish to point out here that although Buddhism was born far prior to **feudalization**, the Buddhism that truly adapted to the **feudalization** process emerged precisely to meet the demands of the times. Just as no one would argue that the Heian Buddhism aimed at magically protecting the state is the same as the Zen Buddhism worshipped by the **medieval** samurai—not to mention the drastic changes in **religious doctrine** (宗教教义), even the very purpose of the religion had become radically different).*

Under such an assumption, humanity would highly likely have stagnated in agricultural society for a much longer period, which inherently introduces massive uncertainty.

Consider merely this one point: if humanity had perpetually been unable to utilize fossil fuels, then whether it be deforestation or land reclamation, the ultimate limits would eventually be reached, and ecological collapse would be an unavoidable inevitability.

In that scenario, let alone whether humanity would have any chance to enter modern civilization, merely maintaining the status quo without regressing would already be a miracle.

Yet, as we now know, the greatness of humanity lies in the fact that, while using our minds to answer the practical concerns of reality, we transcended the limitations of predictable, immediate calculations of self-interest, ensuring that we did not stagnate in the ***feudal period*** for too long.

Therefore, the rise of **religion in the Middle Ages** (中世宗教) is indeed the most powerful proof of the magnitude of human subjective initiative (主观能动性).

As materialists, or atheists who place their faith in modern science, we should be even less inclined—and indeed have even less necessity—to deny the monumental contributions religion once made to the "pacification of the realm" (天下平定 / restoration of societal order). A religion's ***religious doctrine*** (宗教教义) may well be idealistic and unscientific, but the history of the formation and development of religion itself is precisely materialistic and entirely conforms to the theories of social science.

True strength lies not in "me standing in opposition to you," but in "you being encompassed by me."

If we study religion from a scientific perspective, acknowledging religion's contributions will not diminish the mighty power of science in the slightest, because the former can itself be fully explained by science.

However, I must admit that my observations of religion are exceedingly superficial. Because in my current environment, I lack both the conditions for intuitive perception and the access to highly valuable literature and historical documents.

Chinese culture inherently lacks philosophical speculation (哲学思辨), and despotic rulers throughout history have naturally never wanted the commoners to be exposed to such things. Consequently, I can say I know next to nothing about specific religious philosophy.

Although I know many questions are of monumental significance, I simply have no starting point to research them.

For example, what common characteristics did the **medieval religions** (including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) popular during the early ***feudalization*** period share in terms of ***religious doctrines*** (教义), ***religious orders*** (教团), propagation models, and their interactive dynamics with secular regimes? And how did they differ from the state religions prior to ***feudalization*** *(i.e.,* ***Classical religions****)*?

Or, for instance, how did the doctrines of various religions transform throughout the entire ***feudalization*** process? Through what methods did the major religions enact these transformations? How did heretical sects (异端派别) emerge, and what social phenomena did they reflect? How did the major religions cope with mystic schools (神秘主义流派)?

If these questions could be answered thoroughly, it would be of immense help for humanity to understand the **medieval feudal class society** (中世封建阶级社会)—the most crucial historical period since the birth of humanity—and thereby grasp the developmental trajectory of human civilization.

If these thoughts I have penned are fortunate enough to be read one day, I sincerely hope that those who possess a deep understanding of the major religions and their histories—especially those with profound insights into Christianity—might provide scientific and persuasive answers.

2, It is Necessary to Distinguish Between Political Efficiency and Social Efficiency

Another highly meaningful reflection for me is my current realization that the so-called ***political efficiency*** (政治效率) is indeed fundamentally distinct from ***social efficiency*** (社会效率).

Here, the term "***social efficiency***" refers to the proportion of the ***social surplus*** (社会剩余) that is utilized for expanded reproduction, technological investment (including investments in basic sciences, engineering, culture, arts, education, etc.), the improvement of public services and welfare, the advancement of humanitarian causes, and the promotion of consumption. These two forms of efficiency are frequently and deliberately conflated within our country's discourse. For instance, our official propaganda relentlessly claims that Western democratic countries are extremely inefficient, that their governments are perpetually in an unstable state, and that internal ideological polarization makes it difficult for them to adopt unified measures. Consequently, it asserts that our own political system is immensely efficient, having achieved brilliant developmental successes under visionary, unified leadership. In this context, the "efficiency" emphasized by our political propaganda is almost exclusively ***political efficiency***.

Over the past six months, however, I have clearly realized that the social development of humanity must be grounded in long-term evolutionary trends. Therefore, on the fundamental issue of determining the rise and fall of nations, ***social efficiency*** is the decisive factor—the ultimate

determinant of success or failure. The extent to which the ***social surplus*** can be utilized for productive accumulation and technological investment directly dictates the speed at which a society can develop and progress, which in turn determines the degree of development and liberation each individual can achieve.

Conversely, ***political efficiency*** is inherently a neutral term. While I naturally understood this intellectually in the past, I admittedly lacked an intuitive grasp of it. Yet, what I have seen, heard, learned, and pondered over the past few years has profoundly shocked me. Now that I clearly comprehend the terrifying magnitude and duration of the crimes a government is capable of committing across vast scopes, the "neutrality" of this term can be fully understood. For a well-functioning society where the government's decisions genuinely reflect the overarching needs of the public, high ***political efficiency*** is undoubtedly highly beneficial for social development, and ***social efficiency*** will consequently be elevated. However, when the government's interests are fundamentally aligned with suppressing the society's needs and destroying any potential for change, high ***political efficiency*** merely means that social production undergoes catastrophic destruction and societal wealth is annihilated more thoroughly. In such scenarios, let alone being "low," it is entirely possible for ***social efficiency*** to be reduced to zero over the long term.

In fact, we can observe that, aside from the developmental stages no later than those of ***early slavery*** (早期的奴隶制) states, natural forces—namely, disasters that humans cannot contain or predict, or the severe scarcity of critical resources (which was notably evident in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica)—could cause human society to stagnate or even regress for long periods. Once humanity, on the eve of the emergence of the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国), achieved significant elevations in metal smelting techniques and noticeably advanced its capacity to transform nature (marked by the expansions of Ancient Greece, China's Zhou Dynasty, and the Indo-Aryans, as discussed in Part One), regional natural disasters could no longer halt the intrinsic progress of civilization, provided they were not global cataclysms.

This was largely because the geographical scope of civilization itself had expanded. For example, when the Aegean civilization was primarily confined to islands like Crete, a single volcanic eruption was sufficient to cause a devastating impact. However, when the Ancient Greeks established colonial city-states "ubiquitously" along the Mediterranean coast (the term "ubiquitously" being an exaggeration, of course), a natural disaster of the previous scale was no longer sufficient to inflict a fatal blow upon this civilization.

Thus, we can clearly see that since entering the era of ***classical states***, there has been fundamentally only one root cause for the stagnation or even regression of civilization: the generation of a "cancer cell" within the civilization itself. This manifests as a colossal rentier class, epitomized by an unabated ***bureaucratic system*** (官僚体制), which consumes almost the entirety of the ***social surplus***, driving the civilization's ***social efficiency*** down to near zero.

We can (somewhat loosely) draw an analogy between this transformation and the growth of the human body. When a person is very young, their immune system is highly immature; at this stage, the greatest threats to their life are external injuries and pathogenic microorganisms. However, in today's era of advanced medicine, people no longer have to resign themselves to fate upon falling ill as the ancients did, and average life expectancy has more than doubled compared to two millennia ago. Consequently, in old age, individuals must increasingly confront diseases caused by the dysfunction of their own bodily systems, with cancer being the prime representative. Can one claim that a cancer cell is a cell lacking in vitality? Obviously not. Cancer cells do not lack vitality; rather, they possess far too much of it. It is just that their vitality constitutes an absolute disaster for the human body itself.

The numerous examples cited previously also demonstrate that in an abnormal ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家), the higher the ***political efficiency*** (政治效率), the less likely it is for ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) to be high, and the greater the price the entire society must pay. Formally speaking, the total volume of the ***social surplus*** (社会剩余) multiplied by the society's ***social efficiency*** equals the total volume of effective investment in that society; this total volume, in turn, directly determines the quality and quantity of inventions and innovations.

Therefore, we can easily answer a fundamental question: why can small nations achieve monumental feats, while many large nations with massive populations and vast territories behave like giants with feet of clay?If we observe ancient Egypt and ancient Greece during the final millennium BCE, although the total population of Egypt might have been more massive than that of the core region of ancient Greek civilization, and the lands along both banks of the Nile River were even more fertile, the ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) possessed by Egyptian society at that time was probably barely above zero. In contrast, ancient Greek society exhibited a high ***social efficiency*** rarely seen in the entire ancient world. Consequently, in absolute terms, the Greeks held a distinct advantage in productive accumulation and technological investment, which explains why they could create such astonishing civilizational achievements. The examples contrasting the European Christian states during the ***Middle Ages*** with a colossal entity like China are even more glaring. Although China's total wealth and ***social surplus*** were massive, the proportion that could be effectively utilized was virtually non-existent. Under such circumstances, expecting it to achieve greater development than Europe is a delusion, not to mention that the royal court fundamentally opposed and repelled such development anyway.

Admittedly, there are indeed cases where extremely high ***political efficiency*** was employed to forcibly extract societal wealth and channel it into effective investment, although such examples are pitifully rare. One can easily observe this phenomenon in China during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. This point is evidenced by the vigorous inventions and rapid social progress in our country during the two centuries spanning the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE (within a very short period, a trend of ***feudalization*** (封建化) emerged from within the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国)—anyone who visits the museums in Shaanxi and Henan to view the terracotta models of large

Eastern Han manors will gain a very intuitive understanding of this). This belongs to the reaction made by a ***classical state*** (古典国家) when confronting intense external stimuli. The fact is, after the Han Dynasty, this historical phenomenon never reappeared in China; all the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) ever did was drag the entire nation backward. Therefore, we can assert that indoctrinating the common people to believe that ***political efficiency*** is everything, while completely ignoring or obscuring the concept of ***social efficiency***, is a quintessential piece of Chinese-style propaganda.

Naturally, we must also point out that a specific relationship exists between ***political efficiency*** and ***social efficiency***. A country with exceedingly low ***political efficiency*** cannot possibly have high ***social efficiency***. This is because excessively low ***political efficiency*** inherently implies that the society is in a state of turmoil, where stable social relations do not even exist. Let alone utilizing the ***social surplus*** for expanded production and investment, merely maintaining basic production becomes a problem; naturally, ***social efficiency*** cannot be high. Conversely, a country with exceedingly low ***social efficiency*** cannot sustain high ***political efficiency*** in the long run. Excessively low ***social efficiency*** means that there exists within the society a massive rentier class armed with political power. To expect these individuals to maintain efficient administration—especially to adopt swift responses when coping with changes—is simply a pipe dream. For anyone who harbors any doubts about this, my advice is to come live in China for three years; I truly see no necessity to offer any further refutation. People often quote British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, saying that democracy is not necessarily the best system, but it is undoubtedly the least bad system.

Actually, in my view, Churchill clearly lost a degree of his nerve when facing Soviet military pressure in the early Cold War. He should have stated with unwavering conviction that the democratic system is simply the best system humanity has thus far witnessed and realized. The significance of this system lies in the fact that, although it cannot achieve immediate compliance through coercive administrative power like some autocratic states, in the long run, it ensures that ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) can be maintained at a relatively high level. This is because every individual's private property and the fruits of their labor are genuinely respected and protected, granting the people greater freedom for development and choice.

We must further point out that the so-called "political inefficiency" of democratic countries—represented by developed ***capitalist nations*** like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—is merely an illusion inside the minds of the Chinese people; it is the result of the global overarching peace having been maintained for far too long. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor back then, were they not also pinning their hopes on the assumption that the United States—the world's largest democratic country (in terms of scale)—would struggle to rapidly mobilize for a total war? Regardless of what the Japanese thought back then, they have clearly been jolted awake by the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, which could rapidly return to the battlefield no matter how heavily it was struck, alongside countless warships and aircraft, inexhaustible ammunition, and two nuclear weapons. Must other countries pay such a massive price as Japan did just to realize this fact?

As for whether ***social efficiency*** itself can be used as a metric to measure the level of social development, this currently remains an open question. I personally lean towards the view that, excluding the transitional phases between class societies, from ***slavery society*** (奴隶制社会) to ***feudal society*** (封建社会), and then to modern ***capitalist society*** (资本主义社会), the ***social efficiency*** of each is higher than that of its predecessor. However, I also feel that the precise value of this ***social efficiency*** cannot, after all, be exactly quantified. To date, there is no effective research methodology for this; therefore, no definitive conclusions can be drawn, and we can only wait to see if better research instruments are developed in the future.

During my contemplation of these two types of efficiencies, and combining this with my previous views on the land issue (namely, that the fundamental requirement of modernization is the decline of land's status among various factors of production, yielding the position of the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素) to capital), I increasingly feel that when examining a sociological problem, one must strive to grasp the "fundamental quantity" related to the issue, and absolutely avoid being misled by secondary variables and relationships. For example, the transition from ***feudalism*** (封建主义) to ***early modern*** and ***modern society*** requires that land lose its paramount position in the socio-economic sphere and yield it to capital. As long as this occurs, regardless of the method used or which class leads it, and despite potential differences in speed and cost, the society will ultimately march towards early modernization/modernization; conversely, it will deviate from it.

The momentum of social progress depends on ***social efficiency***. Thus, whether it is autocratic rule implemented by an exceptionally talented monarch like Emperor Wu of Han, or the various types of systems implemented by the numerous city-states of ancient Greece, as long as a high ***social efficiency*** can be guaranteed for a certain period, substantial strides in social development are an inevitable outcome. This mindset of seeking the "key variable" in a problem closely resembles certain mathematical theorems (such as Gauss's Theorem). We only need to observe the flux of certain key variables across an entire historical period; as for the complex circulation of social structures it undergoes in between, there is no need to be overly concerned about them at the very beginning.

I do not know whether "key variables" universally exist in sociology, but based on my experience of living in China for so long, I can say with absolute certainty: concealing the significance—and even the very existence—of the "key variable," thereby misleading the people into focusing their attention on secondary variables and relationships, is indeed the infallible playbook (不二法门) used by the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) to deceive its populace.

3, Perspectives on the "Fascist States" of Germany and Japan

The terminology I employ here is admittedly controversial. Mainland China tends to indiscriminately label all three major Axis powers as "Fascist states," yet most informed individuals

are aware that a considerable typological gap exists between Japan and genuine Fascist states. The existence of this discrepancy is inevitable. Japan's process of ***feudalization*** (封建化) commenced significantly later than that of Western Europe, although its pace of catching up was remarkably rapid throughout most of its history. However, during the ***early modern period*** (近世社会), due to its relative geographical isolation and the fact that its neighbors were ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** (复辟官僚国家), Japan's social development encountered certain impediments. By the first half of the 20th century, the "***modernity***" (现代性) possessed by Japan—namely, the unique social, cultural, political, and economic characteristics inherent to a ***modern society***—was still less pronounced than that of Germany and Italy. Consequently, in terms of features such as extreme nationalism, Fascist one-party dictatorship, personal autocracy, and a mass-based, unified Fascist ideology, Japan between 1931 and 1945 could hardly be classified as a true Fascist state. Regardless of whatever typological gaps existed between Japan and Germany or Italy at the time, it does not preclude me from discussing them as an integrated whole here. That is to say, the distinctly styled "Fascist regimes" of these three nations were all forged under the conditions of having fully undergone the process of ***feudalization***, but with insufficient development of ***capitalism***. Therefore, for the sake of categorization, I will forgo further differentiation and adopt the generalized terminology utilized in mainland China.

For youths across the globe, at an age when their worldviews are yet to mature, the most captivating aspect of history is invariably the history of human warfare and the tales of heroes who achieved extraordinary feats in battle. Naturally, I was no exception. Be it novels about the Second World War, the memoirs of participating generals and leaders, or even the illustrated encyclopedias of military equipment that children adore, I indeed devoured a great deal of them. However, as I grew older and my own level of cognitive awareness gradually elevated, my perplexities surrounding the Second World War multiplied.

A quintessential example is that Germany and Japan, even during their periods of horrific Fascist rule, exhibited societal characteristics vastly distinct from those of the Soviet Union and Chinese (the current regime) societies. As my understanding of Chinese society deepened, this profound discrepancy inevitably captured my attention. For instance, in Nazi Germany, even a high-ranking official at the ministerial level would insist on appending "Doctor" (Dr.) to his title, provided he held a doctoral degree. The most representative figure in this regard is undeniably Hitler's loyal fanatic and one of the most powerful individuals in Nazi Germany, Paul Joseph Goebbels. Even in Chinese translations, he is generally referred to as "Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda of Nazi Germany, Dr. Goebbels." Although I knew—even without understanding German or ever having visited Germany—that German academic degrees, especially doctorates, were exceptionally difficult to attain, the immense value and profound pride these high-ranking Nazi bureaucrats attached to their doctoral degrees still utterly astounded me.

In "party-bureaucratic" countries such as the Soviet Union and China, while one cannot claim that academic credentials are entirely useless, in an environment where one's status within the

bureaucratic system (官僚体制) plays the absolute decisive role in the distribution of social wealth, an academic degree is completely negligible when placed before an official rank. According to the established conventions of our bureaucratic society, even at the relatively low level of Section Chief (科长), "Doctor" can no longer serve as the primary title. This means that if a section-level cadre within the Chinese bureaucratic system simultaneously holds a doctoral degree, people will almost certainly address him as "Section Chief So-and-so"; only under highly specific circumstances would anyone highlight his doctoral degree. For ranks above the section level, it goes without saying. Only in formal official introductions are educational backgrounds and highest degrees presented prominently, but in reality, few people pay attention to them, and practically no one takes them seriously.

In a certain sense, this is also because the absolute dominance of the bureaucracy naturally encompasses academic degrees. In countries like ours and the former Soviet Union, once you have become a high-ranking bureaucrat, acquiring a degree requires virtually zero effort. Ironically enough, precisely because academic credentials command so little respect in these countries to begin with, some individuals, despite possessing immense power, cannot even be bothered to obtain a degree for the sake of window dressing. It was precisely as my social experience grew that I increasingly felt the behavior of individuals like Goebbels, who placed such immense value on their academic credentials, to be utterly bizarre. (Of course, I am well aware that the truly bizarre entity is myself; compared to Germany—even the Germany under Nazi rule—the society in which I reside is vastly more anomalous.)

As Japan was one of the two nations (the other being Russia) that inflicted the greatest catastrophic invasions upon China since the ***modern era***, and as it was our nation's direct adversary throughout the anti-Fascist war, civil discourse within China regarding Fascist Japan far exceeds discussions about Nazi Germany. However, it is a profoundly tragic reality that, compared to the attitude Chinese people *ought* to adopt—being anti-Japanese Fascism but not anti-Japan—it is blatantly obvious that my compatriots much prefer being anti-Japan while not being anti-Fascist. The fanatical propaganda slogans coined by the Japanese invaders during the so-called "**Greater East Asia War**," as well as the insubordinate "gekokujo" (下克上 / acting independently without orders) behaviors of the radical junior officers, are widely idolized among restless and ignorant peers of my generation. In fact, the moment I open any social media platform dominated by young users, it takes less than five minutes to encounter such intellectually deficient articles or videos.

Although I am disgusted by this, such a massive bombardment of information gradually made me realize that Fascist Japan—the regime most loathed by the Chinese people—actually possessed certain characteristics that I had never noticed before, characteristics starkly different from those of states like China and the Soviet Union. Astonishingly, the Japanese exhibited a profound reverence for the law, even well before their post-war democratic reforms. The most striking manifestation of this is that the *Constitution of the Empire of Japan* (commonly referred to as the "Meiji Constitution"), after its formal promulgation in early 1889 until it was replaced by the "Peace Constitution" post-war, underwent absolutely no substantive amendments. The Japanese government only adjusted the interpretation and implementation of specific clauses. This implies

that even during the period when the Japanese military harbored overwhelming power, when Fascist political organizations like the Imperial Rule Assistance Association could dictate national politics, and when the Japanese Empire's war of aggression was rapidly expanding, Japanese Fascists did not attempt to amend the Constitution. Instead, they merely fortified their control over the entire nation through the addition of various wartime decrees.

During the infamous "February 26 Incident," when radical junior officers of the Imperial Way Faction launched a coup d'état demanding that the Emperor bypass the "traitors to the nation" and assume direct personal rule, Emperor Hirohito surprisingly expressed extreme fury toward the coup.

He emphasized that by realizing the "imperial sanctioning of all state affairs" (万机御亲裁) under the Meiji constitutional system, he was already exercising direct rule, and no other form of direct rule could exist.

If one does not simultaneously understand the histories of both China and Japan, it is exceedingly difficult to comprehend the absolute shock I—as someone who has lived in China for an extended period—feel toward this. In our country, it is virtually unimaginable for a ruler not to exploit such a "pro-emperor coup," but rather immediately decide to suppress it. If one still cannot grasp this "bizarreness" of Japanese society, one only needs to observe the contemporary phenomenon in the vast non-democratic nations of the Third World where constitutions lack any binding force whatsoever, and see how effortlessly these countries amend their constitutions.

As for the Soviet Union and Soviet-style states, it goes without saying. The constitutions enacted by these regimes can be altered on a whim. They can declare they have bypassed whatever historical stage they wish to bypass, and proclaim whatever ideology they desire as their guiding ideology. Even if we confine our gaze to the Fascist or extreme right-wing nations that rose during that turbulent era, the degree to which Japan's original constitution was undermined was still relatively minor (of course, this is also related to the incompleteness of the Meiji Restoration; after all, the power granted to the Emperor in the Meiji Constitution was already immense).

Under Salazar's rule, Portugal enacted a new constitution in 1933; Romania enacted a new constitution in 1938; Miklós Horthy's regency in Hungary lacked a formal constitutional text; Spain under Franco did not enact a new constitution; and the Tsardom of Bulgaria amended the constitution from its early days of independence. Italy under Mussolini did not abolish its original constitution (the Statuto Albertino enacted during the Kingdom of Sardinia) but effectively suspended its implementation and fascistized the state through supplementary decrees. The Third Reich under Hitler drastically amended the original Weimar Republic Constitution and gradually realized a Fascist dictatorship through a series of laws, such as the *Enabling Act* of 1933, the *Law Concerning the Highest State Office of the Reich* of 1934, and the *Nuremberg Laws* of 1935.

Another incident that left an incredibly profound impression on me is the ordeal experienced by the Japanese historian Sokichi Tsuda during the World War (the so-called "Tsuda Incident" [津田事件]). Because the entire sequence of this event is easily verifiable even within China, I will not reiterate

the details here. What utterly shocked me was that under the rule of Japanese Fascism, when Sokichi Tsuda and Shigeo Iwanami were indicted for violating the Publication Law, they were only sentenced to three and two months of imprisonment, respectively, and were even granted a two-year suspended sentence. Tsuda personally insisted on appealing, arguing that the grounds for the indictment were invalid, and by 1944, the case concluded with the charges being dropped.

This legal saga lasted for four years: indicted in 1940, found guilty in 1942, and acquitted in 1944. Throughout this entire process, legal procedures such as witnesses testifying in court were astonishingly conducted in a normal manner, and the personal freedom of both men was not restricted. Tsuda left Tokyo for Hiraizumi and did not return to Tokyo until after the war. Even though I am aware that the sociological doctrines officially endorsed by the Empire of Japan likely inherent a division between "exoteric" and "esoteric" teachings (显密之分), the Empire generally maintained a basic respect for its intellectuals. However, the fact that its judicial system could operate relatively normally and independently during the most rampant era of Fascist dictatorship is completely unimaginable to a Chinese person like myself.

During the chaotic years in our country, persecuting dissident intellectuals to death did not require strict, sluggish legal procedures—in fact, it required no legal procedures whatsoever. The authorities simply resorted to home raids (抄家), public struggle sessions (批斗), and torturing them to death; it could be done as swiftly as the authorities desired. Therefore, at that time, I clearly realized something that fundamentally differs from the common perception of the United States' "glorious martial achievement" in successfully transforming Japan single-handedly. Japan's post-war democratic transition was evidently predicated on the fact that Japanese society *itself* already possessed ample conditions to accept such a transformation. The ***social foundation*** of a nation with nearly a hundred million people could not possibly have been altered by a mere few years of American military occupation.

For instance, the *Constitution of Japan* (the "Peace Constitution" [和平宪法]) currently implemented in Japan set an incredibly high moral tone, drastically differing from the previous Meiji Constitution [明治宪法]. Yet, its ability to gain widespread acceptance within Japanese society is inextricably linked to the society's intrinsic tradition of respecting the law. If we were to trace the origins of this tradition, it should probably be credited to the monumental legacy of the Japanese samurai, epitomized by figures like Yasutoki Hojo [北条泰时].

By the first half of 2023, I was able to clearly recognize that the rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan was essentially the result of these three countries starting late, where their industry and ***capitalism*** had achieved considerable development but remained insufficient. The "insufficient development" here encompasses two aspects. First, the old feudal nobility domestically still retained substantial power and played a crucial role in politics. Second, due to their late industrialization, they essentially missed the wave of imperialist partition of the world; lacking overseas colonies, they consequently had scarce access to raw material sources and captive markets

within their spheres of influence. Both forms of insufficiency are the result of the transition from the ***early modern period*** (近世社会) to ***modern society*** occurring far too late in these three nations.

One can easily observe that it was evidently no coincidence that Germany, Italy, and Japan formed the Axis powers. Formally speaking, the unification of these three countries occurred practically within the span of a single year: the unification of Italy in 1870, the unification of Germany in early 1871, and the ***abolition of the han system*** (废藩) and ***establishment of prefectures*** (置县) in Japan in mid-1871. The primary reason Germany and Italy unified so late was that, during the ***Late Middle Ages***, relatively strong central governments did not exist in these two countries, and since the end of the ***Middle Ages***, they were frequently subjected to interference by neighboring, already centralized ***early modern absolute monarchies***.

As for why Japan's ***early modern period*** persisted into the latter half of the 19th century, the main reason is that Japan's ***Middle Ages*** (中世) intrinsically ended later than Europe's. Furthermore, as the sole feudal state in Asia, Japan was excessively isolated. (This means that even if the total size of the East Asian market was no smaller than the European market back then, it was exceedingly difficult for Japan to achieve development by interacting with an increasingly capitalizing market, as it was possible for European nations. This was because China, the core of ***East Asia***, was a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家), and the situation in ***Korea***, under Chinese influence, was equally unoptimistic.) Coupled with distinct religious and cultural differences from Europe, Japan maintained a long-term isolationist policy (锁国) under the generally conservative atmosphere of ***East Asia***.

Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances, these three countries had all fully traversed the stage of a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) and possessed the characteristics of an ***early modern society***. Consequently, there were no intrinsic, endogenous obstacles in their path to realizing modernization —a situation vastly different from that of Russia and China. In our country's political discourse, among the numerous characteristics of Fascism strongly emphasized, the concept of "**class conciliation**" (阶级调和) is one of the rare arguments in our official doctrines over the years that warrants the praise of "hitting the nail on the head." Fascist states often strenuously dilute internal class contradictions within a nation, advocate for supra-class nationalism, and declare that the enemy of the state is a particular foreign regime or a specific ethnicity.

If we consider that during the political unification process of Germany, Italy, and Japan—which was fraught with compromises—a massive number of feudal nobles still managed to play significant roles in national politics, then this point becomes much easier to comprehend. What the Fascist states sought to conciliate was evidently not just the ruled classes and the ruling classes; they also needed to conciliate factions *within* the ruling class itself. If we also consider that the ***absolute monarchy*** was established upon such an "equilibrium during the transition of classes," then Fascism is indeed the long shadow trailing behind the ***absolute monarchy state***. Even today, there remains a

theory within Japanese academia that views the Meiji Restoration as the establishment of Japan's ***absolute monarchy state***; however, I still lean toward viewing Japan's ***early modern state***, namely the Tokugawa Shogunate [德川幕府], as Japan's ***absolute monarchy***.

The disposable wealth, level of education, and contemplation of the world they lived in possessed by ordinary citizens in Germany, Italy, and Japan at the dawn of the 20th century were incomparable to those of several centuries prior. The proletariat had indeed awakened, increasingly possessing the power and willingness to express their viewpoints and achieve their objectives.

Therefore, when Fascist states emphasized "class conciliation" (阶级调和), they were compelled to claim that even the workers and peasants at the bottom of society were objects of conciliation, or even the primary objects. This paradoxically makes it easy for observers to overlook the conciliation between the old and new ruling classes.

Furthermore, since Fascist states did not wish to use class as a criterion for dividing society, and their level of social development was insufficient to sustain long-term, universal social welfare, they had to pin their hopes on a national policy capable of generating rapid returns to satisfy the interest demands of various domestic classes and strata—namely, external warfare. Conveniently, externalizing conflicts (转移矛盾) could effectively divert the attention of all domestic strata. This is consistent with the fact that after major European powers generally transitioned into ***absolute monarchies*** (绝对主义国家), the scale, frequency, and intensity of wars on the European continent rose drastically. It is just that the Fascist dictatorial system, unlike the ***absolute monarchy state*** (绝对君主制国家), possessed no possibility of long-term endurance.

This is because the technological level of the 20th century was entirely incomparable to that of two or three centuries prior; the speed of information dissemination, the total volume of trade, the destructive power of war, and the degree of ordinary people's political participation had elevated exponentially. Once a Fascist state entered a state of war readiness, it inevitably faced a "total war" (总体战争) surrounded by enemies on all sides; it would either be annihilated in this war or utterly defeat all its adversaries. Even if a Fascist state were to miraculously defeat all its enemies, the factors hindering the full development of ***capitalism*** within the country itself would have completely vanished. This victorious empire would possess colonies, markets, industrial facilities, and skilled workers at its disposal. Coupled with the fact that there would be no places left in the world worth conquering, the Fascist dictatorship would lose its viability to persist, and the Fascist state would transition into a normal ***capitalist regime*** (资本主义政权).

Once the need for class conciliation disappeared, there would be no necessity for the entire nation to heavily emphasize racism, thereby avoiding unnecessary troubles. This is much like how one should not forget that while the genocide committed by Nazi Germany is a heinous crime forever worth remembering, did not the British Empire, the French colonial empire, the Kingdom of the

Netherlands, the Kingdom of Belgium, and the United States of America harbor racist ideologies and actions prior to the Nazis? Did these nations not slaughter vulnerable ethnicities? For an individual, emphasizing a sense of morality is paramount; but for a massive society, its collective moral framework is also constructed upon social realities. The changes in the actual conditions confronting social development are the decisive reasons behind the gradual ebb of racism in these nations. A Fascist state would inevitably discard the Fascist system after achieving victory, much like how monarchs during Europe's period of ***absolute monarchy*** dared to proclaim "I am the state" (朕即国家), yet once the power of the bourgeoisie gained a distinct advantage and the class equilibrium could no longer be maintained, the kings of England and France had their heads severed.

Fascist states were in the exact same predicament, except that the tempo of everything in the 20th-century world had become far faster than before; thus, even if they had won, this transition would have occurred much more swiftly. In today's world, there are many alternate history works (架空作品)—whether literature, film, television, or game mods—premised on Germany and Japan winning the Second World War. They overwhelmingly tend to assume that the Fascist dictatorship would persist after the Fascist regimes secured victory in the global war. This contradicts the laws of social development. Of course, one could argue that maintaining this assumption is necessary to attract readers and players. After all, if Germany and Japan finished fighting the world war and then simply normalized, initiating a Cold War between themselves, it would obviously be too similar to the world we actually experienced to arouse the interest of potential audiences.

Therefore, I must point out that although the German, Italian, and Japanese Fascists were the initiators of the World War and the culpable parties for its war crimes, this certainly does not mean that these three nations were at the most backward societal stage. By comparison, the Soviet Union, as a major participant, was perhaps the most backward party (in fact, the term "backward" is inaccurate, as the stage the Soviet Union occupied was not on the normal developmental trajectory of humanity; like the Chinese empire (中华帝国), it was completely deformed). For all of humanity, even if Germany, Italy, and Japan had actually secured victory in the Second World War, human development might only have been delayed by a few decades. However, had the Soviet side actually achieved victory in the Cold War, it would have likely meant the termination of human civilization (人类文明的终结).

4, If We Must Say, the United States is the Foremost Contributor to the Anti-Fascist War

Consequently, the answer to a highly controversial question on the Chinese internet—namely, *which country contributed the most to the people's anti-fascist war worldwide*—is entirely self-evident.

If the question were "which country contributed the most in *World War II*," then this would largely remain a purely military question, comparing which of the Allied powers destroyed the enemy's war capacity to the greatest extent.

But once the question shifts to the *anti-fascist war*, it transcends the military realm entirely. **Because fascism is an ideology; it is a social system.**

Strategic bombing, deep operations (大纵深突击), and decisive fleet battles are indeed sufficient to annihilate fascist *armies*, but they are insufficient to annihilate *fascism*—unless the Allies intended to execute a "Three Alls" scorched-earth policy (三光政策) against the nations where the soil for fascism existed.

What truly eradicated fascism after the victory of World War II was nothing else but the brand-new world order led and established by the United States.

Integrated into this system, Germany and Japan no longer needed to resort to war to fulfill their needs; agricultural products, industrial raw materials, labor, and markets could all be obtained within this new international system at a reasonable cost.

Simultaneously, while occupying Germany and Japan, the Allied forces utilized political means to purge the power of the **old feudal nobility** (旧封建贵族) and rectify economic relations detrimental to the development of ***capitalism***—such as the agricultural land reform (农地改革) in Japan.

When the new world order could resolve the critical problem of insufficient capitalist development for latecomer ***capitalist countries*** like Germany, Italy, and Japan, and once the domestic forces obstructing social progress in these countries were weakened, fascism simply no longer possessed the soil to grow in these nations.

And at the end of 1945, which country in the entire world possessed the capability to create such a new world order? It could only be the United States, and indeed, it accomplished it.

The international order spearheaded by the United States bears epoch-making significance in human history because it is the first world order capable of universally benefiting its participating nations and enabling massive development—that is, the first *non-zero-sum* world order in history.

It is the most remarkable progress since the US took over global leadership from Britain, and the overall peaceful situation of human society over the past few decades relies entirely upon it. If American global leadership possesses any legitimacy, it derives precisely from this.

Therefore, we can firmly say: **Annihilating fascist armies relied on anti-fascist armies. But annihilating fascism itself relied on the brand-new international order epitomized by the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.**

Without such an international order to resolve the inevitable problems faced by Germany, Italy, and Japan, would the anti-fascist war have truly ended with Japan's surrender?

Actually, the answer is glaringly obvious. Never forget that the Entente Powers similarly achieved military victory in World War I. Yet, why was there a universal realization by the end of 1918 that the so-called post-war peace was nothing more than an "interwar period" (间战期)?

This was simply because too many countries completely failed to realize their interest demands during WWI. Germany ceded territory and paid massive reparations due to defeat; Italy gained only a sliver of borderland from the collapsed Austro-Hungarian Empire; and the Japanese were utterly unsatisfied with merely taking over Germany's already pitifully sparse interests in the Far East.

The fact is, only a few years after the war ended, war preparations were already in full swing. When France was constructing the Maginot Line, the Weimar Republic was still trying every possible means to deal with reparations. When the Americans were formulating *War Plan Orange* (橙色方案) to prepare for a decisive battleship clash with Japan, Japan was still in the *Taishō Democracy* (大正民主) era!

"There's going to be another massive war soon"—this was fundamentally not a secret in the 1920s.

During Hitler's first six years in power, the very reason Britain and France frequently adopted the policy of appeasement (绥靖政策) was, in a sense, because their decision-makers fundamentally believed in their hearts that Germany harbored the desire and the capability to launch the next war. Furthermore, both nations were acutely aware that Germany's interest demands had not been met, thus attempting to partially satisfy those demands in exchange for Germany not going to war.

Suppose by the end of World War II this problem had still not been resolved. What reason would we have not to believe that it would merely be *another* 20-year armistice?

Therefore, we can state with absolute certainty: in the people's anti-fascist war worldwide, the country that made the greatest contribution is unequivocally the United States.

Anyone who believes the answer is the Soviet Union is, in reality, a quintessential vulgar materialist (唯物质论的人). No matter how superior weapons and equipment may be, they cannot fight on their own; ultimately, it is humans who wield them.

It is exactly like when Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) confiscated all the weapons in the realm to cast the Twelve Metal Colossi (十二金人), yet still failed to stop the surging tide of anti-Qin uprisings. Ultimately, aiming merely to destroy the enemy's military capacity is far inferior to ensuring they never become an enemy again.

This resonates perfectly with the famous proverb by the Ming Dynasty philosopher Wang Yangming (王阳明): **"Defeating the thieves in the mountains is easy; defeating the thieves in the mind is difficult."** *(破山中贼易，破心中贼难)*

Of course, recognizing on a political level that the United States achieved unparalleled merit in the anti-fascist war does not in any way negate the colossal military contributions it made.

Whether it was the strategic bombing of Germany and Japan, the military aid provided to Allied nations like the Soviet Union and China, the opening of the second front, the total annihilation of the Imperial Japanese Navy, or the powerful containment the US and Britain exerted on the Axis powers from the "exterior lines" *(外线 / referring to regions outside the Eurasian "World Island" [世界岛])*—their strategic military significance is simply immeasurable.

Not to mention, America's formidable industrial production capacity and scientific prowess made the nation itself a powerful pillar of confidence for the other Allied nations.

Therefore, even from a purely military perspective, the United States' contribution to World War II is second to none, and highly likely no less than that of the Soviet Union. Such so-called "contribution values" are inherently difficult to quantify.

The long-standing practice in our country's historical narrative of deliberately downplaying the United States' contributions to World War II and the *global anti-fascist war* is, in my view, profoundly idiotic (愚蠢至极). **Belittling others does not make oneself greater.**

5, The War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea Could Not Halt the Grand Trend of the Oikumene

For me personally, re-evaluating World War II has also been a profoundly meaningful endeavor. I now realize that since the ***modern era*** *(here, "modern" refers to the general sense of humanity*

collectively entering the industrial society), nine times out of ten, the ultimate success or failure of a nation is not decided on the battlefield. Rather, **the victor and the vanquished have already been predetermined; war is merely the medium through which the final outcome manifests.**

The disparities in the societal stages occupied by various nations are so massive, and social transformations since the ***modern era*** have occurred so rapidly, that this generational gap (代差)—born from fundamental advancements or backwardness in social structure—can no longer be compensated for by population scale, brilliant strategy, the genius of a few leaders, or even sheer luck bestowed by heaven.

The year 2023 marked the 70th anniversary of the victory of what China calls the "*War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea*" (抗美援朝战争). Although the armistice agreement was ultimately signed in the second half of the year, official propaganda surged massively starting in the first half.

Consequently, I took some time to reconsider the historical event of the Korean War.

Our official narrative claims that the Korean War itself ultimately ended in a draw, because the final ceasefire line was not far from the original 38th Parallel. Compared to the beginning of the war, South Korea gained more territory in the eastern sector, while North Korea acquired the ancient capital of Kaesong (开城).

As for the Chinese "*War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea,*" it is portrayed as a victory because China did not initiate the Korean War, nor did the People's Volunteer Army (PVA / 志愿军) enter ***Korea*** right at the beginning. *(Before the war, ethnic Korean troops from the Fourth Field Army during the Chinese Civil War were indeed transferred to North Korea, but these troops participated at the outbreak of the war strictly as North Korean armed forces, not as the Chinese military).*

Up to this point, there is no major flaw in our country's official propaganda. However, the subsequent point easily provokes deep reflection: **Chinese officialdom incessantly propagandizes that "the Chinese People's Volunteer Army repelled the interference in *Korea* by the United Nations Command (联合国军) led by the United States."**

They heavily emphasize that the "UN Command" comprised over a dozen countries, including traditional imperial powers like Britain, France, and the US. They then contrast this with the "impoverished and weak" (积贫积弱) image of the late Qing government and the Republic of China, which were repeatedly invaded decades prior, to illustrate that **"the Chinese people have stood up"** (中国人民从此站起来了).

However, following this logic, a moment's reflection reveals a crucial, counter-intuitive reality.

It is indeed a fact that the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and the Korean People's Army, bolstered by Soviet aid, repelled the UN Command as it approached the Yalu River.

But does the US-led "United Nations Command" have any precedent in history? Has there ever been another country in the past capable of organizing a massive allied force under the banner of "United Nations" to defend the independence of a regime?

The answer is glaringly obvious. Regardless of the extent to which the Americans might have twisted the UN resolution to place the coalition forces under their own control, the very fact that this million-man army could be organized, effectively commanded, deployed in high-intensity warfare for three years *(certainly high-intensity considering the overall post-WWII situation)*, and ultimately succeed in preserving South Korea, **inherently manifested and cemented America's global leadership capability.**

If we look at this from the perspective of Joseph Stalin, the primary instigator of the Korean War, the colossal role played by the "UN Command" becomes incredibly easy to see.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, although people habitually refer to the confrontation between the blocs led by the US and the USSR in the decades following WWII as the "Cold War," **these two blocs were fundamentally not on equal footing from any perspective.**

The notion that "the Soviet Union was sufficient to rival the United States" is, ultimately, a product of people's ideological conceptions rather than reality.

The reason lies in the fact that the United States genuinely created a world order that universally benefited participating nations. Even neutral countries that ostensibly did not belong to the US-Soviet blocs were, in reality, integrated into the US-led international order.

Conversely, not only did the Soviet Union have no desire to lead an international order of its own, but it fundamentally lacked the capability to do so even if it wanted to. It was already a massive blessing if the Soviet Union could manage to orchestrate an incredibly crude division of labor within its own bloc, rather than rushing to overtly plunder the territory, resources, and technology of its satellite states (仆从国).

In fact, even the Soviet Union itself was forced to hover on the periphery of the US-led world order. It still desperately required certain technological transfers from developed Western nations, not to mention the necessity of exporting massive amounts of energy to the international market rather than merely within the Soviet bloc.

Therefore, we can say that although the United States is nominally just a single country, it effectively reaps the benefits of an (almost equivalent to) global market encompassing trade, investment, labor, and talent. This was an unimaginable advantage for the Soviet bloc, which had set up a separate enclave on the "periphery of the world." Under this dynamic of one side rising while the other wanes (此消彼长之下), the ultimate defeat of the Soviet Union was entirely predictable.

Consequently, if Stalin realized this problem in his twilight years, knowing he could not win, the maximal objective he could pursue was a **"lose-lose"** (双输) outcome—that is, to preemptively sabotage the immature world order the US had just established.

Judging from the actions he took, one has every reason to believe that Stalin, as an exceedingly cunning and treacherous dictator (老奸巨猾的独裁者), was capable of perceiving this grand historical trend.

He first provoked the **Berlin Crisis** (柏林危机) in 1948 to probe America's capability and willingness to defend the security of its allies. However, the United States responded powerfully through the Berlin Airlift.

In the year following the end of the first Berlin Crisis, Stalin instigated Kim Il-sung to drive south and attack South Korea as another military probe. But when the US once again demonstrated a hardline stance to resolutely defend its allies and shared values, Stalin himself recoiled. The Soviet representative outright boycotted the UN meeting, thereby enabling the US to organize the so-called "UN Command" exactly according to its own will.

To avoid the total loss of the Korean Peninsula buffer zone, the Soviets had no choice but to rely on the Chinese to deploy troops while they merely provided indirect military support. Yet, even so, the independence of South Korea was ultimately preserved.

Therefore, one can assert that the nature of the Korean War was fundamentally identical to the Berlin Crisis: **it was an offensive that the Soviet bloc *had* to win.** It was absolutely not a scenario where merely holding onto pre-war territory could be declared a victory.

When the Americans repeatedly demonstrated their resolution and capability to defend their own values and the shared interests of their allies in the face of aggressive Soviet offensives, the US-led international order became increasingly consolidated, and other nations developed profound trust in the US. The Soviet-aligned nations, on the other hand, could only become increasingly isolated, left entirely behind by the tide of the world. Defeat was inevitable.

The fact is, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was impossible for the Soviets to destroy the newborn international order using any non-military means. And neither the Chinese, the North Koreans, nor any allies the Soviets could utilize possessed the capability to shatter the US-led world order through war.

The Soviet Union's only remaining option was to launch a direct war against the US themselves—to fight another World War. As long as more than half the world was turned back into ruins, what meaning would it hold even if the Americans ruled over a massive pile of rubble?

However, whether due to the catastrophic losses the Soviet Union suffered in the war against Germany, or Stalin's personal attitude of "understanding the times" (识时务), Russia ultimately did not act as fanatical leftists like Trotsky had hoped: *"setting themselves on fire to destroy the imperialist order."*

When the communist bloc's several sabotage operations at the dawn of the Cold War all ended in failure, then as far as the Cold War was concerned, the **"Battle of Sekigahara"** (关原合战) had already been fought and concluded. As for when the **"Siege of Osaka"** (大坂之阵) would be fought, it was purely a matter of time—not to mention that the eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union was primarily due to its own internal rot.

Therefore, the Korean War can absolutely not be considered a draw; it was a monumental victory achieved by the United States. For the US, the new leader of the world, the Korean War was undoubtedly a milestone on its path to pacifying the oikumene (平定天下).

As for the strategic buffer zone that the Chinese believe the *War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea* preserved for them, it can hardly be counted as any real achievement. **When the grand tide of history has irreversibly swept past, how can the gain or loss of a tiny corner of *Korea* compare to the gain or loss of the entire world?!** (大势去矣，朝鲜一隅之地岂能比天下之得失哉！)

During Toyotomi Hideyoshi's unification of Japan, the Shimazu clan also massively routed the supreme ruler's punitive army at the Battle of Hetsugigawa (户次川). Yet, this neither shook the Toyotomi public regime nor could it possibly halt the overarching tide of Japan's unification.

Claiming victory merely because North Korea was preserved carries a heavy flavor of **"shooting the arrow first and drawing the bullseye later"** (先射箭后画靶子). Did the Chinese initially not hope to annihilate South Korea? Impossible! Otherwise, why did they attempt to continue advancing southward after capturing Seoul? Were they going on a sightseeing tour?

If one spends any amount of time living in China, it is incredibly easy to understand: even if the Korean War had ultimately ended with South Korea unifying the peninsula, our country's propaganda would *still* claim the *War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea* was a magnificent victory—because they would just say that if we hadn't deployed troops, even Manchuria (the three northeastern provinces) couldn't have been saved!

When you shoot the arrow first and then draw the bullseye around where it lands, it is impossible to lose. Even if you shoot the arrow directly into your own foot, you simply draw a bullseye on your foot and declare victory.

The so-called *War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea* was a war where the Chinese people were shackled to a train hurtling toward a cliff, solely due to the ambitions of the Soviet rulers. At the cost of catastrophic sacrifices in human lives and material resources, China achieved nothing more than tactical victories while ultimately suffering a massive strategic defeat.

For the people of our country, this is an excruciating tragedy too unbearable to look back upon. Feeling "pride and glory" for this war is truly, utterly absurd.

6, Regarding the Issues Encountered During Writing, and a Hope for Understanding

Up until I graduated from my undergraduate studies and returned to Xi'an (西安), all the discoveries and insights worth writing about are contained herein; this period of slightly over half a year has indeed been extraordinary for me. Yet even so, the more new things I discover, the clearer it becomes that there are still many problems beyond my personal capacity to resolve, and the narratives in many places inevitably contain inadequacies. What worries me is not that there are still too many things I do not understand, because even the most erudite scholar cannot exhaust all the knowledge in the world. *Life is finite, while knowledge is infinite; this is an eternal sorrow, so why grieve over it?*

However, China's social environment is peculiar; those aspects of official doctrines that align with reason are **as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns** (凤毛麟角). Coupled with artificially constructed information barriers, it is indeed tremendously difficult to align with the international community on many concepts. When I arrived at domains untouched by predecessors, I could only tentatively name some new phenomena myself, making unreasonable aspects unavoidable. For some of the narratives inherited from our country's traditional expressions that have already been mentioned, I once again extend my apologies here to any potential readers.

For instance, the term "***slavery society*** (奴隶制社会)" in Chinese originates from the Soviet five-stage theory [五段论]. Although even people of insight in China have long known that the ***slavery society*** is fundamentally not the dualistically opposed social structure of slave owners and slaves as claimed by the Bolshevik (布尔什维克), there is no more precise term available domestically as a

substitute, so I have no choice but to continue using it. Whether the ruling class (阶级) of this period can be generalized as the "slave-owning class" is also highly questionable. In my previous narratives, I substituted the term "ruling class of the ***slavery society***" with "the early nobility evolved from clan chieftains, religious priests, and military commanders (using 'early' to contrast with the landed nobility generated during the period of ***feudalization*** (封建化)", but this is merely my personal perspective.

An even greater issue lies in designations such as "***capitalist society*** (资本主义社会)" and "***capitalist state*** (资本主义国家)". The Chinese officialdom uniformly adopts this descriptive method for Western Europe and the United States. Although its flaws are blatantly obvious, before gaining a profound understanding of the societies of these nations, I have no way to formulate alternative naming conventions and can only adopt the general domestic terminology. The complexity of modern social structure and the meticulousness of the division of labor are unprecedented. ***Class*** division is exponentially more difficult now—not only compared to before the Industrial Revolution, but even compared to the era of Marx (马克思). Today, the term "***capitalist society***" indeed carries the suspicion of excessively exaggerating the ***class*** contradiction between the bourgeoisie [资产阶级] and the proletariat [无产阶级] as being **as incompatible as fire and water** (水火不容) (though anyone who truly believes there is zero contradiction is simply a fool). Yet, if one broadly refers to Western nations as "democratic states" [民主国家], this evidently fails to grasp the fundamental commonality of these countries; Western democratic systems are clearly built upon the foundation of certain social realities and could not possibly have grown out of thin air. As long as one observes those countries that lack social conditions equivalent to the West but attempt to forcibly transplant Western democratic systems, the failure of such political practices is a common occurrence.

Personally, regarding this issue, I am actually more inclined to reinterpret the so-called "XX-system societies." That is, to emphasize the status of the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素) acting as the modifier, supplemented by the ***mainstream mode of exploitation*** (主流剥削方式), while no longer emphasizing the high degree of antagonism between the ruling ***class*** and the ruled ***class*** as the principal characteristic. For example, a ***slavery society*** is a society where labor occupies the primary position among various factors of production, and where the direct exploitation of labor through forced labor serves as the ***mainstream mode of exploitation***. A ***feudal society*** (封建社会) is a society where land occupies the primary position among various factors of production (means of production), and where the exploitation of agricultural surplus through the collection of rent and taxes—including corvée rent—serves as the ***mainstream mode of exploitation***. A ***capitalist society*** is a society where capital occupies the primary position among various factors of production (means of production), and where the exploitation of workers' surplus value [剩余价值] (tentatively

recorded this way in accordance with Marx's phrasing) serves as the ***mainstream mode of exploitation***.

Redefining them in this manner would perhaps be more reasonable, and it is also more meaningful from the perspective of a Chinese person. After all, approaches like Marx's—which only consider ***class*** contradictions within typical ***class*** societies—are evidently completely insufficient to explain the history of the Chinese empire [中华帝国]. The principal contradiction here can be entirely described as that between the bureaucratic ***stratum*** (阶层) and all other ***classes***. This is also why, since I began writing these texts in 2023, I have strongly emphasized that while the righteousness and rationality of the oppressed people's resistance must be affirmed, one must adopt a prudent attitude when discussing the contradictions between the ruling ***class*** and the ruled ***class***. This is because the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) exploiting this point is no longer a mere possibility; it has been a century-long reality occurring since the establishment of Soviet Russia (苏俄). **One cannot constantly stumble in the exact same place repeatedly** (在同一个地方不停跌倒).

Of course, readers of these records should not think that I have made no contributions whatsoever to the use of these concepts. For things outside of China that I do not understand, there is indeed nothing I can do, but regarding concepts related to Chinese history, I have still done a great deal of work in **setting things right** (拨乱反正). For example, the Chinese official narrative calls the period from the Qin (秦) to Qing (清) dynasties our country's ***feudal period*** (封建时期). I have obviously completely discarded this idiotic theory used to deceive the common people.

In my narrative, I refer to the period from the Qin, both Han, up to the Western Jin dynasties (秦代两汉一直到西晋) as the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) or China during the ***classical period*** (古典时期). Meanwhile, what I call "Feudal China" [封建中国] merely refers to Chinese society during the four hundred years spanning the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries CE, which is what the international Sinology community refers to as "**Early Medieval China**" (早期中世纪中国). From the 7th century until the end of the Qing Dynasty, I have consistently adopted the designation "***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家)" (or society), while pointing out that the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** began to mature during the Song Dynasty (宋代).

I have also made a distinction in the designations for the ruling class [统治阶级] oppressed under the bureaucratic system in China, and the ruling class under the ***feudal political system*** (封建政治制度) represented by Western Europe and Japan. In China, I simply call them the ***landlord class*** (地

主阶级). Only for regimes during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝) where ***feudalization*** (封建化) was relatively pronounced, or for border regimes like Dali (大理) that had already been feudalized, do I adopt the same designation used for the ruling classes of Europe and Japan, namely "***feudal lords*** (封建领主)".

Another area where readers might have obvious doubts is that when I compare Europe and Japan, there is a distinct difference in the terminologies used on both sides. For example, according to the Japanese's own periodization, immediately after the end of the ***Chūsei*** (中世), it is already the ***early modern period*** (近世). However, according to the general translations of Europe's periodization in Chinese academia, when the ***Middle Ages*** (中世纪) ended in 1453, it was clearly still quite a distance away from what Europeans consider the "***modern era***" (现代). The time in between was named the "***early modern***" (近代), or, named after the major historical events that occurred at the time, the "Reformation and Enlightenment period" [宗教改革和启蒙运动时期].

My approach to handling this is to uniformly map the Western concept of "***early modern***" into Chinese using terms equivalent to the ***"近世/近代"***, generally no longer adopting the literal translation of ***"早期近代"*** . For Europe after 1800, I will directly use the term "***modern***" (现代) to describe it, while the period approaching the present is referred to as "contemporary" (当代). The relevant reasons are explained in Chapter 12, Section 30.

What I want to say is that the reason such a massive discrepancy arises in the Chinese translations of the periodizations of Europe and Japan is that Europe is a continent vastly larger than Japan, containing many different regimes. The fact is, the fundamental reason 1453 is marked as the chronological node for the end of the ***Middle Ages*** is that landmark historical events such as the end of the Hundred Years' War (百年战争) and the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire (东罗马帝国) occurred at both ends of the continent. However, this does not mean that the social structure underwent a massive transformation across such a vast region within a short period of time. This is completely different from the changes in Japan—**like a violent storm** (疾风骤雨般)—over the 30 years from Oda Nobunaga (织田信长) marching into Kyoto (*jōraku* (上洛)) to the death of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (丰臣秀吉) from illness.

Furthermore, people must get used to the fact that the existence of a transition between two "typical" social stages is an inevitable occurrence. For example, when people mention Europe's ***absolutist states*** (绝对主义国家), the first thing that comes to mind is undoubtedly France under

the rule of the Bourbon Dynasty (波旁王朝). But did the ***absolutist state*** truly only begin to emerge in the 17th and 18th centuries? If one observes *The Prince* (《君主论》) written by Machiavelli (马基雅维利), it is not hard to discover that this work—which called for a powerful monarch to save Italy (though the author himself ultimately hoped for a republic [共和])—was published in 1532. At this time, no country in all of Europe could be definitively called an ***absolutist state***.

However, human thought cannot possibly exist detached from social reality. The fact that Machiavelli could write *The Prince* somewhat demonstrates that many factors supporting the formation of an ***absolutist state*** had already emerged within his society (such as the emphasis on attitudes toward citizens, the diversification of methods to seize ruling power, and the monarch's ways of utilizing personnel). The ***absolutist state*** was already in the process of forming. This is precisely why I believe there is no need to carve out a separate stage between the end of a typical ***feudal society*** (封建社会) like the ***Middle Ages*** and the formation of a typical ***absolutist state***. It is entirely sufficient to merely view it as the earlier portion of the "***early modern society***" (近世社会) during the transitional period. Both the Reformation [宗教改革运动] and the Enlightenment [启蒙运动] themselves are simply prominent external manifestations of this transition.

As for why I equate what Europeans consider the ***absolutist state*** (绝对主义国家) with what the Japanese consider the ***early modern state*** (近世国家), the reason lies in the fact that many characteristics of the Edo shogunate (江户幕府) were indeed identical to those of Europe's ***absolutist states***. However, I must also say that the developmental level of the Edo shogunate simply could not be mentioned in the same breath as that of Western European countries like Britain and France. This was determined by Japan's national scale, diplomatic scope, and geographical location, and it was also the result of Japan's ***feudalization*** (封建化) beginning relatively late.

For instance, people can easily point out the most conspicuous difference between the Edo shogunate and Europe's ***absolutist states***: the latter had an extremely high proportion of military expenditure in their fiscal spending and were exceptionally bellicose. Conversely, the Edo period was an exceedingly rare era of prolonged peace in Japanese history; Japan's massive expansion actually occurred from the Meiji (明治) to the early Showa (昭和) periods, right after the shogunate ended.

But then again, just as I already mentioned when writing the section on Japan, Japanese society started far too late compared to Europe. Each of its "standard" historical periods often had to wait until its final stretch of time to exhibit typicality. For example, the so-called classical Japan only truly possessed distinct characteristics of a ***classical state*** (古典国家) during its final 100 years—

the Insei (院政 / Cloistered Rule) period of the Heian era (平安时代). The so-called ***Chūsei*** (中世) Japan only ultimately realized a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) fundamentally identical to Europe's during its final 100 years—the Sengoku period (战国时期). Therefore, it is perfectly normal for Japan's ***early modern society*** (近世社会) to also exhibit this kind of lag.

There is absolutely no need to **discard the entire body just for the sake of a tail** (为了一根尾巴而放弃全身). Just as the Japanese would not refuse to call the pre-Insei Heian period "classical Japan," nor would they refuse to call the Kamakura (镰仓) and early Muromachi (室町) periods prior to the Sengoku period "***Chūsei society***." When people mention that the Azuchi-Momoyama regime (安土桃山政权) placed immense importance on and heavily relied upon cities and circulation, and when people pay attention to the rich material and spiritual lives of the *chōnin* (町人 / townsmen) in Edo, this already affirms that Edo-period Japan possessed the characteristics of an ***early modern state***, and possessed the characteristics of an ***absolutist state*** (such as the growing strength of the civic stratum [市民阶层]).

When the Japanese speak of the "***early modern period***" (近世), they emphasize temporal characteristics; when Europeans speak of "absolutism" (绝对主义), they emphasize manifestations in social features. I have simply combined the two and refer to it as the "***early modern absolutist state (society/stage)***" (近世绝对主义国家（社会/阶段）). This should not cause any reading difficulties.

I personally also have some issues regarding naming conventions, and I can only ask the readers who come across them to bear with me. For instance, when describing the period of the Great Migration [民族大迁徙], after the ***barbarians*** (蛮族) entered the Chinese heartland, they did not choose to undergo ***feudalization*** (封建化) in accordance with the general laws of social development. Instead, they reached a compromise with the Han Chinese landlords [汉族地主] and pivoted toward a policy of **bureaucratization** [官僚化]. I termed this compromise "***The Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise*** (地主-官僚妥协)". This nomenclature can obviously easily cause misunderstandings, leading people to mistakenly believe that the two compromising parties were the bureaucrats and the landlords.

Furthermore, for those who are relatively familiar with Chinese history, it is even easier to mistake it for another social phenomenon—namely, the already re-established ***restoration-bureaucratic***

state (复辟官僚国家) executing ***co-optation through official ranks and stipends*** (官位荣禄收买) to win over the ***aristocratic great clans*** (门阀士族), who were massive landowners. They might think I am describing political maneuvers akin to those behind the centralizing trend of the aristocratic clans moving toward the two capitals of Chang'an (长安) and Luoyang (洛阳) during the Tang Dynasty (唐代).

I admit that I was somewhat hasty in my naming here. What I actually wanted to express is that the small hyphen between "landlord" and "bureaucrat" should be viewed as a rightward-pointing arrow, meaning that the ***barbarians*** "abandoned becoming landlords to become bureaucrats" (of course, a more precise formulation would be "abandoning becoming ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) in favor of becoming ***bureaucratized landlords*** (官僚化地主)"). However, it is obviously highly unlikely for readers to adopt this interpretation initially. If named after the two compromising parties, it ought to be the "**Barbarian-Landlord Compromise**" [蛮族-地主妥协].

Additionally, a highly regrettable point regarding historical materials is that because China's ***feudalization*** is a highly remote event that occurred fifteen or sixteen centuries ago for us, in an era lacking printing technology and where paper had just been popularized, historical records could not possibly be as abundant as in later times. The already limited historical materials have been scattered and lost over such a protracted period, leaving even fewer readable ones today. Therefore, aside from rather vague records such as the debate between Liu Yuan (刘渊) and Liu Xuan (刘宣) over what path the Xiongnu (匈奴) should adopt, it is impossible for us to find explicit and blatant accounts like those in the *Jianyan Yilai Xinian Yaolu* (《建炎以来系年要录》) to study how people at that time viewed this compromise. This is simply a reality we have to accept.

As for those highly prevalent translation issues in Chinese, they are even more numerous. For example, in China, the terms "emperor" [皇帝] and "imperial system" [帝制] have been abused to a degree where it is impossible to untangle them. The supreme ruler of Persia (波斯) is called an emperor, the supreme ruler of Mali (马里) is called an emperor, the supreme ruler of the Mughal (莫卧儿) is called an emperor, the supreme ruler of Rome (罗马) is called an emperor, and the supreme ruler of the Holy Roman Empire (神圣罗马帝国) is also called an emperor. Although everyone knows that these foreign monarchs are completely different from Chinese emperors, and even the Chinese emperors of the ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** (复辟官僚帝国) are already vastly different from the emperors of the Qin and Han (秦汉) ***classical empires*** (古典帝国), such

appellations have nonetheless been retained. For anyone with a certain understanding of human history, this should not cause any confusion.

I hope readers will not forget that my contemplation and the very act of writing down these texts were completed while bearing academic responsibilities and under conditions severely restricting access to information. The existence of deficiencies is, in many instances, an unavoidable reality.

Finally, I must unleash a complaint about the early 2023 movie *The Wandering Earth II* (《流浪地球 2》). Even though this **garbage movie** (破电影) has absolutely nothing to do with what I am writing, I actually bought a ticket to watch this **trashy film conveying anti-humanity values** (传达反人类价值观的烂片). Not roasting it would simply be out of character for me. China's self-proclaimed "patriots" [爱国者] are forever wallowing in these borderline-delusional grand narratives [宏大叙事]. They never spare a single glance at the myriad of visible hardships suffering right before their compatriots' eyes, much less can one expect these guys to speak a word or two in their defense.

To think that after writing so much, I was still swindled out of twenty or thirty bucks by a movie waving the banner of patriotism—this is truly the most brainless act I have committed in the past year.

VOLUME II IN XI'AN (第二篇：在西安)

Preface to Volume II

In the summer of 2023, I returned to Xi'an to continue my studies, and during that summer vacation, I undertook a very short-term internship at a local company.

Although this rare leisure time was an excellent opportunity for me to seize every moment to read more books, the truth is that the impact of my reflections over the previous six months had simply been too overwhelming. My brain was incapable of processing information at such an excessively high transmission rate. Therefore, aside from continuing the work of **"rectifying historical truths"** (拨乱反正), that summer was mostly spent pondering what the profound implications of these discoveries themselves truly were.

In the ensuing year and a half of my graduate studies, I resumed my habit of voluminous reading. Even more preciously, I reconnected with my friend 'B', whom I had known since elementary school. He provided immense assistance to my thinking, enabling me to supplement my views on numerous critical issues.

During this period—though I risk sounding self-congratulatory (自鸣得意)—I must nonetheless record my genuine sentiments. That is: as I continuously read and absorbed external knowledge, I increasingly realized that the facts discovered and the theories proposed by countless scholars in the past are merely **a single cross-section (截面) of the colossal truth I unearthed through exploring the initial, fundamental questions regarding Chinese history.**

I must admit, how many scholars have reached the periphery of this truth, or even touched it with their own hands? But the question remains: why did they ultimately fail to see the complete picture?

The answer I can attempt to provide is: **A lack of experiential context (缺乏体验).**

Although many nations have risen and fallen, and human history is vast, there are actually not many historical facts capable of revealing the universal laws of social development through stark contrast.

China is undoubtedly a nation of paramount importance for the sociological study of humanity. Its sample size is sufficiently massive *(historically occupying 1/5 to 1/4 of the human population)*, its territory is vast, its history is ancient, and its literature is inexhaustible. Most importantly, the historical developmental stages China experienced are exceptionally unique.

If a scholar does not thoroughly study Chinese history, though they might arrive at certain answers through powerful intuition, they will be unable to provide compelling evidence, making it extremely difficult to use those answers as a breakthrough to expand their theoretical achievements.

Another nation that absolutely must be studied is Japan, owing to two unique aspects.

First, as stated previously, Japan is the sole non-miniature state that did not experience the Great Migration, was not formed as a colony post-Age of Discovery, yet spontaneously embarked upon and ultimately succeeded in the path to modernization.

Second, this uniqueness is reflected in the special relationship between China and Japan. As a "latecomer state" adjacent to China, Japan was heavily influenced by China historically. Ultimately, however, it completely broke away from China's social system, pivoting instead to form a ***feudal political system*** (封建政治制度) identical to that of Western Europe.

Therefore, one must simultaneously study the historical events that transpired in China, Japan, and Europe to definitively pinpoint the exact roots of modernization.

The facts we can observe today are these: Although Marx and Engels possessed almost no precise understanding of the Far East, they did—relying on their outstanding scientific literacy—accurately pinpoint the relationship between the ***economic base*** (经济基础) and the ***superstructure*** (上层建筑).

And the absolute secret to modernization exists entirely within this relationship; otherwise, how could you possibly unify Japan and Western Europe under a single theory?

Consider the contrasts: The Japanese eat rice *(implying labor-intensive agriculture)*, while Europeans eat wheat; The Japanese believe in Buddhism and Shintoism, while Europeans believe in Christianity; Japan is located in subtropical and temperate monsoon climates, whereas Europe has absolutely no connection to monsoon climates; The Japanese use Kanji and Kana, while Europeans use alphabetic scripts; Europe generally belongs to the Indo-European language family, whereas Japanese is essentially a language isolate; Japan possesses no tradition left by Greco-Roman classical philosophy; Ethnically and racially, Europe is equally worlds apart from Japan.

In fact, such glaring differences could be listed endlessly. Yet, the sole similarity lies in the fact that Japan ultimately experienced a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) and an ***early modern society*** (近世社会) highly identical to those of Europe.

This is a rare, isolated case (孤例), but even this single isolated case is sufficient to entirely demolish theories attributing modernization to racial superiority, Christian ethics, European classical philosophy, or even linguistic scripts. Instead, it points irrefutably to one core element: **the *economic base* of the entire society and its accompanying *superstructure*.**

Even though Japan was so isolated among feudal nations, and its philosophy and science up until the ***modern era*** were naturally not worth mentioning compared to Europe, it was precisely because Japanese society was structurally similar to European society that it walked upon a path proven to be correct. Consequently, Japanese society naturally developed certain consciousnesses and concepts akin to those of Europe. Simultaneously, after comprehensive contact with Europe, it assimilated European ideas far more smoothly and achieved broad societal consensus.

This example powerfully demonstrates that the so-called advancement or backwardness of a society rests entirely upon its **overall social structure**, rather than being directly determined by a hodgepodge of cultural, ethnic, or environmental factors.

I emphasize "directly" here because other factors naturally exert indirect influences. For instance, if the environment is extremely hostile to human survival, it is perfectly normal for a society to remain in a prolonged state of backwardness. But fundamentally, this is still because the level of ***productive forces*** (生产力) struggles to advance, leading to the consequence of chronically backward ***relations of production*** (生产关系).

In situations where a single direct causal factor is sufficient to explain the phenomenon, one should refrain from making superfluous modifications. After all, **"Entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity"** (非有必要勿增实体) is a scientific principle proven overwhelmingly effective through long-term empirical testing.

However, prompting people to adopt a specific standpoint is exceedingly difficult. Because every individual's perspective on observing the world is inevitably shaped by the environment in which they have long lived; there is absolutely nothing one can do about this.

Therefore, aside from those who have lived in China for a prolonged period, received adequate scientific training, and possess abundant knowledge, it is extremely difficult for others to recognize the uniqueness of our country's history. And even if they do recognize it, providing an appropriate explanation remains daunting.

Once the uniqueness of Chinese history remains unexcavated, Japan will subsequently appear to be nothing more than a slightly peculiar island nation—at best, one that is overly developed. Thus, the logical chain shatters into pieces.

Furthermore, the personal emotions engendered by one's environment also become a critical factor in research. As the Chinese often quote: *"The nation's misfortune is the poet's fortune; verses penned amidst catastrophic upheaval are inherently masterful"* (国家不幸诗家幸，赋到沧桑句便工).

At least for me, the reason I persist in contemplating and delving deeply into these issues is, in itself, born from a profound love for my compatriots and the massive psychological shock I endured when facing the drastically plummeting social reality.

It is precisely because people always possess an inescapable **"reference frame"** (参照系) when observing the world that there is enormous disparity in how people view the exact same event. As for societies that have evolved to extremely aberrant states, residents of other societies completely lack even the most fundamental imagination required to comprehend them. Even when factual evidence is overwhelmingly clear and detailed, they almost **"dare not"** believe that the glaringly obvious inferences are actually correct.

One discourse that deeply astonished me came from Eric Voegelin, the Austrian-American scholar, in his *History of Political Ideas*. Almost at the very beginning of this book—in Section 3 of the Introduction, titled *Surface Apoliticality*—he provided the following commentary: *"The modern plebeian movements prompt Marx and Engels, along with the vast scholars who follow them, to equate the revolutionary movements among the laboring peoples of Greece and Rome with modern phenomena. Only if one accepts the unproven hypothesis that the economic status of human groups is the absolute deterministic factor in history can such analogies possibly be rational."*

For a scholar whose fundamental identity is a philosopher to so effortlessly realize the errors of Marx and Engels—errors that I only ultimately confirmed through protracted logical deduction—is astonishing.

Was not their greatest misjudgment the unquestioning assumption that the ruling class, holding economic dominance, would naturally acquire political dominance, thereby universally categorizing the essential contradiction of human society strictly as the contradiction between the ruling class and the ruled class?

The reason Voegelin could intuitively sense Marx's error despite lacking an understanding of Far Eastern history likely lies in the fact that, like Marx and Engels, he was born in Germany and was intimately familiar with the pervasive modes of thinking among Germans influenced by German social realities. Furthermore, in Austria, he palpably experienced the rise and imminent approach of fascism for several years. Such an experience likely allowed him to realize, without needing too much deliberation, that a government genuinely possesses the potential to bloat to the point of overriding *all* classes.

Another critical point is that a society's current ***social existence*** (社会存在) exerts a staggeringly decisive effect on what kind of social ideologies that society will embrace and propagate.

Previously, when researching Japan's reforms imitating China during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, I discovered that when one society consciously learns from another, it does not simply "copy

whatever is advanced" or "copy whatever is backward." Rather, it copies whatever aligns with its own current stage of social development.

Similarly, it is extremely difficult for people to attribute the emergence of universal concepts solely to the cultural level—for instance, claiming that because Chinese culture lacks democratic traditions, China can hardly form a democratic system.

In reality, for a society of sufficient scale, as long as it is given enough time, its massive number of societal members will always generate all sorts of diverse thoughts. The West did not necessarily lack a Shang Yang (商鞅), and China did not necessarily lack a Montesquieu. But why did their viewpoints fail to flourish in their respective societies?

This is because the society was insufficient to support the dissemination and practice of such ideas.

Society is ceaselessly "filtering" (筛选) concepts.

This is exactly like the relationship between seeds and soil. Even if the exact same handful of mixed seeds is scattered onto two plots of land with drastically different conditions, the plants that ultimately gain dominance will undeniably be different.

The final reason was similarly realized by Voegelin, who was forced to deal with the Nazis: *"The most profound and thorough thoughts of a political theorist are fundamentally incommunicable."*

Although this statement is too absolute, the perspective Voegelin expressed is undeniably correct. Let alone a political theorist—take myself as an example, an ordinary Chinese mathematics student without a burning passion for political science, merely possessing a deep concern for the country and people I live among. Once my reflections on society and its history reach such a profound depth, even for the sake of my own safety, I will not easily speak of them to anyone.

Any reflection on the society one lives in, once it deepens to a certain level, is not only forbidden by the local government, but will also be utterly misunderstood by other members of society, even provoking an attitude of hostility.

Of course, Voegelin was ultimately luckier than I am. He, after all, lived in a normal, far freer country *(even Austria back then could not be compared to China)*, and later moved to the United States, the largest immigrant nation in the world. The danger brought about by the mere act of thinking there was infinitely smaller than what I face here.

Perhaps it is these three reasons combined that result in this phenomenon: although people have individually, one after another, virtually touched every part of the elephant, simply no one has been

able to hit the nail on the head and point out: **"Look, this is the elephant; the elephant is an animal with exactly these characteristics!"**

Another, more radical question I encountered is whether it is necessary to expand the scope of the observational results derived from Chinese history. This became the issue I pondered most since mid-2023.

Fundamentally speaking, the observations I have made are grounded in only three regions: China, Japan, and Western Europe. Among these, I face no difficulties in understanding China's history and reality. Comprehending Japan is significantly harder, but since the two nations have interacted extensively as long-time neighbors, grasping it as a whole is still feasible. Understanding Europe, however, is exceedingly difficult. I can only select highly acclaimed works by prestigious scholars to read, making it invariably much harder to understand what transpired in Europe than in Japan.

Yet even so, the work of **"rectifying historical truths"** (拨乱反正) regarding Chinese history has already been fully corroborated by China's documentary records and social reality. Furthermore, the new perspectives established during this rectification process clearly possess a kind of universality.

Consider the most core conclusions I have drawn:

- *"The **ruling class** cannot spontaneously acquire political dominance; the process of seizing political power is itself a supremely important form of class struggle in human history."*
- *"When a class society inevitably exists, the **ruling class** holding full power constitutes the historical optimal solution."*
- *"The special status of the **feudal class society** among all the stages humanity has experienced thus far."*

Consider also the "lemmas" (引理) resolved during my deductive process:

- *"The universal causes for the formation of **classical bureaucratic states** and their similarities to the formation of **early modern absolute monarchies**."*
- *"The historical significance of world religions during the **feudal period**."*
- *"The demand for water conservancy construction does not inevitably lead to a **restoration-bureaucratic system**."*

The scope of applicability for these theories has obviously transcended China and even the East Asian region. In fact, many of these conclusions were solidified precisely as a result of examining other regions of the world.

These facts signify that, building upon the endeavors of countless predecessors, I have perhaps further unveiled a corner of the universal laws governing the development of human society.

In fact, from the perspective of re-evaluating the "fascist movements" and the so-called "proletarian revolutions" *(I use quotation marks here pejoratively, referring to the social movements instigated by ambitious demagogues who inverted black and white, exploiting the errors of Marx and Engels to advocate for privileged **bureaucratic states**—not the spontaneous, inherently just struggles of the proletariat against oppression)* that became prevailing trends at the beginning of the last century, this unveiled corner might be of paramount importance. Humanity might very well use this as a starting point to achieve an unprecedentedly profound understanding of itself.

Although speaking like this might seem overwhelmingly arrogant, since I have already come this far, why not try to take one more step forward?

Perhaps every boy harbored heroic dreams in his childhood. To this day, the most majestic and heroic declaration I have ever heard remains the one written by Isaac Newton in the preface to Book III of his *Principia Mathematica*: **"I now demonstrate the frame of the System of the World."** (现在，我将展示世界体系的框架)

Even though there remain massive differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences or mathematics, in my day-after-day explorations, I have become increasingly convinced that the social sciences can absolutely be researched based on general scientific methods and principles. Every step taken today will bring humanity closer to the truth. Correct conclusions will become the starting points for new theories, while erroneous theories will allow people to draw lessons and avoid wasting intellectual energy in vain.

On a deeply personal level, it remains my ultimate hope that these reflections—however nascent or imperfect they may be—will one day be read. For no matter how profound my disillusionment with China's trajectory over the past fourteen centuries, I harbor an enduring and deep affection for my compatriots. I am steadfast in my conviction that the Chinese people are not destined to exist in their current condition, nor should China be condemned to serve merely as a **cautionary tale** (反面示例) in the grand narrative of human history.

I have come to realize that social revolution is undeniably a protracted endeavor spanning generations. Even if a day of **deliverance and renewal** (光复之日) should eventually dawn upon this land, it will no longer concern me; even were I to live into the dawn of the next century, I

would not survive to witness it. Yet, such is the trajectory of human thought: we must first comprehend a reality before we can harness it, and only then may we attempt to transform it.

Therefore, I hold faith that my contemplations—alongside the invaluable supplements provided by my friends—should they become known to the world, will ultimately contribute to the emancipation of the Chinese people, paving the way for a happier existence for generations to come. This is precisely why, even without the absolute certainty of possessing all the answers, I have chosen to commit the entirety of my reflections to writing. It is my earnest hope that those who encounter these words in the future will understand the choice I have made.

Chapter 9: Banknote Figures, Common Sense, Tactics and Momentum, Concepts, Opportunity Costs in Politics, Ministers and Slaves, Dream of the Red Chamber

1, Chinese Political Jokes That Are Even Funnier Than Soviet Political Jokes

When I returned to settle down in my familiar city after a four-year absence, I felt even more profoundly that the country had changed drastically. Or perhaps, it had never changed at all; it was merely regressing from the rare openness and freedom at the beginning of the century back to China's inherent "normality" (常态).

The barricades that became ubiquitous during the pandemic on the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda (大雁塔) square—a place I had walked across over a thousand times during my youth and young adulthood—were not removed after the pandemic ended. On the contrary, by 2024, the entire square had been barricaded even more thoroughly.

In the past, people could enter the scenic area unhindered from any direction, making it highly convenient for nearby residents to pass through. But now, entry and exit for the entire Giant Wild Goose Pagoda scenic area are restricted to an exceedingly few designated points; everywhere else is blocked by iron fences. If you attempt to climb over, you risk being intercepted by staff.

Even more absurdly, the direction of pedestrian flow is strictly controlled. Where you exit and where you enter must entirely conform to official arrangements. This kind of physical control is not confined to the interior of the scenic area but extends even to its periphery. In 2024, on three separate occasions when I attempted to pass from east to west along the outer perimeter, I encountered security personnel attempting to block me and funnel me into the scenic area—though I forcefully barged through all three times.

To me, this is utterly inexplicable. Indeed, during holiday evenings, the pedestrian volume between Yanta North Road and Yanta South Road is massive; at those specific times, conducting crowd diversion and control is beyond reproach. However, no one can deny that for the vast majority of the time, there is fundamentally zero necessity for such blockades and controls. **This is nothing but manufacturing endless trouble for the commoners solely for the convenience of the bureaucrats in charge.**

Another phenomenon indicating that this society has become even more oppressive is the subway. Subway security checks (地铁安检) in China are inherently a highly controversial public security issue, which I will not even delve into here.

Starting from the pandemic era, various maze-like barricades began proliferating, forcing residents wishing to enter the subway to detour long distances and inevitably causing congestion. If justified under the pretext of epidemic prevention, this could at least be somewhat explained. Yet, observing the situation of the Xi'an subway in the year and a half since the pandemic ended, these barricades have not diminished; rather, they have multiplied. Ultimately, even during time slots when the subway is practically empty, they are never removed, and when there are large crowds, they paradoxically exacerbate the congestion.

Most ridiculously, I have seen foreign tourists looking utterly helpless multiple times at the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda North Square station when facing these labyrinthine fences, having absolutely no idea how to enter or exit the station.

These inexplicable restrictions made my friends and me feel that our civil rights had been blatantly violated. Some people refer to these barricades as **"livestock pens"** (畜栏), forcing the people to move along rigidly dictated routes exactly like cattle on a farm. In truth, in the eyes of Chinese officials, the people are indeed an entirely different biological species from themselves.

I am now even more certain of one absolute rule in a ***bureaucratic state*****: one must absolutely never expect the government to automatically relinquish its power after expanding it under various pretexts, because there are absolutely no methods to supervise or restrict it.**

From another perspective, our country's political propaganda has become even more shameless. Although it has *always* been shameless, it at least exercised some restraint during the period of favorable economic conditions at the beginning of the century. Now, as the economic situation deteriorates by the day, the contempt and hostility toward the people within official news broadcasts have become increasingly unvarnished.

For example, the issue of self-built housing fires and collapses is incredibly severe in our country. The January 10, 2024, episode of *Focus Report* (《焦点访谈》) specifically addressed the safety hazards of self-built housing, focusing heavily on a building collapse incident in April 2022 that resulted in dozens of deaths.

What infuriated me to my core was this: is it possible that the people renting self-built houses are unaware that they are unsafe? But *why* must they brave such risks to rent these dwellings? Today, China's industrial capacity is by no means weak, and the construction industry is hardly some highly sophisticated, cutting-edge sector. If the entire nation truly possessed *"tens of thousands of spacious mansions to bring joy to all the commoners across the realm"* (有广厦千万间，令天下百姓俱欢颜), who on earth would risk their lives to rent dangerous slums?

Throughout the entire broadcast, one could not witness a single trace of genuinely meaningful reflection. It was entirely composed of leaders feigning heartbreak, swearing oaths that they would rigorously investigate and crack down in the future, vowing never to leave any room for self-built housing to exist.

The entire program first shirked the responsibility entirely onto the people, portraying the people as ignorant, foolish, and greedy for petty gains (贪利); whatever tiny shred of responsibility remained was tossed to local low-level officials.

In truth, anyone with a conscience will never forget: **what drives the people to such desperate straits are the astronomically high housing prices manufactured by the entire state, which suffocate society—while the entity hopelessly addicted to land finance (土地财政) is the government itself.**

For the official channel of a nation playing a major role on the world stage to broadcast such an anti-human program during prime time is appalling. Even though I never subscribed to the official viewpoints to begin with, as a Chinese person, I still felt a profound sense of shame.

Back in antiquity, the philosopher Mencius said to King Hui of Liang: *"If Your Majesty ceases to blame the harvest (the heavens) for the starvation of the people, then the people of the world will flock to you"* (王无罪岁，斯天下之民至矣).

But what Mencius could never have foreseen is that King Hui blaming an unobservable and unaccountable "Heaven" actually constituted a form of moral virtue. Even King Hui of Liang, a failed monarch during an era of "collapsing rites and decaying music" (礼崩乐坏), never once in his life uttered words to the effect that *"the people brought it upon themselves."*

But now? **Those in power can brazenly and righteously declare that the commoners deserve their suffering.**

Even more tragically, it seems there are always individuals eager to prove this exact point through their own actions.

During the winter break in early 2022, nearly a year before China would finally lift its pandemic lockdowns, my mother and I were returning to her workplace via public bus after an outing in the northern suburbs of Xi'an. As luck would have it, while I was rushing for the bus, the mask in my pocket fell out, a fact I didn't realize until I had already boarded.

The bus driver repeatedly urged me to find my mask. After the bus had driven past two stops, I finally confirmed that it was indeed lost. By then, several minutes had passed, and we were only two or three stops away from our destination anyway.

However, the driver and the other passengers adamantly refused to let a "dangerous subversive" (危险分子) who had lost his mask remain on the bus. Ultimately, my mother and I were kicked off halfway to our destination. *(To his credit, the driver did conscientiously pull over near some storefronts, as the probability of finding a place selling masks was at least slightly higher there).*

This incident left an extraordinarily profound impression on me. **Our society is indeed exactly like this: it never hesitates to exhibit unreserved malice toward those it can bully, yet treats the lies of those in power as sacred imperial edicts to be blindly obeyed.**

In this ludicrous and tragic environment, the segment of Chinese people whose minds remain clear have created an abundance of "Chinese political jokes," naturally inheriting the fine tradition of our Big Brother's "Soviet political jokes."

Though calling them strictly "political jokes" is somewhat inaccurate—many are simply "jokes of daily life"—their satire is exquisitely ingenious. Even the most brilliant chapters of *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (《世说新语》 / *A classic Chinese text of historical anecdotes*) might not match them.

I will recount three highly classic "Chinese jokes" here, though naturally, they can only be truly understood by residents of the East Asian cultural sphere.

The First Joke:

Question: Our country constantly proclaims that we are "crossing the river by feeling the stones" (摸着石头过河), but why do I feel that hope is becoming increasingly bleak?

Answer: Because the river we are crossing by feeling the stones is the **Sanzu River (三途川 / The River of the Underworld/Styx)**.

The Second Joke directly parodies a famous passage from the *Zuo Zhuan* (《左传》 / *The Commentary of Zuo*):

"The emperor makes sagacious judgments, and the bureaucrats govern the peace; this is the system of today. Within the fenced borders, what is not the sovereign's land? Eating the produce of the soil,

who is not the sovereign's subject? Therefore, the "Constitution" states: "Under the vast heaven, there is no land that is not the king's; to the very borders of the land, there is no one who is not **consumable material (耗材 / cannon fodder/expendables)**."

There are ten suns in the sky, and humans are divided into ten castes. The inferiors serve the superiors, and the superiors enjoy the luxuries. Thus: The Foreigners rule the Japanese; the Japanese rule the Taiwanese; the Taiwanese rule the Hong Kongers; the Hong Kongers rule the Overseas Chinese; the Overseas Chinese rule the Beijingers; the Beijingers rule the Shanghainese; the Shanghainese rule the Ethnic Minorities; and the Ethnic Minorities rule the Han Chinese (汉族).

(Note: This meticulously outlines the perceived, albeit utterly twisted, social discrimination chain in modern China).

People are meant to be controlled, and speech is meant to be censored, so as to handle all worldly affairs.

The Third Joke:

During the celebration of the 73rd anniversary of the National Day in 2022, someone posted a common Chinese folk saying: *"At 73 and 84, if Yama (the King of Hell) doesn't come for you, you go to him yourself"* (73、84，阎王不找自己去).

Unsurprisingly, this person was reported for subversion. However, the person defended himself saying: *"The ages of 73 and 84 are thresholds (坎); it means the elderly are prone to passing away at these two ages. This is now our 73rd National Day, which proves our country has safely survived the 73rd year since its founding and overcome a massive threshold! I am clearly celebrating the Motherland's birthday; why are you criticizing me?"*

Jokes like these are constantly manufactured on the internet, only to be censored and deleted by auditors within hours. But precisely because such jokes are so intimately tied to people's daily lives, it is impossible to delete them all. I firmly believe that the Chinese jokes created on the Chinese internet between 2019 and 2024 have far surpassed those of the former Soviet Union in both quality and quantity.

Even more prevalent than such satire is **deconstruction** (解构).

Thanks to the modern internet, it is far easier for Chinese netizens to deconstruct a "sacred" concept than ever before. Even if you have no other skills, you only need to do one thing to achieve this goal: **repetition—a thousand times over.**

For example, faced with the phenomenon of "cyber Red Guards" (网络红卫兵) constantly using Mao Zedong's quotations to attack others, these very quotations are increasingly being deployed in completely opposite, or even downright nonsensical (无厘头), contexts. By 2024, even when logging onto a gaming forum, you frequently encounter hilarious comments parodying Mao's famous speeches: *"I am not afraid of [X Game Mechanic] at all; whenever I hear about [X], I get happy..."*

Therefore, I must say this: although I frequently complain that the cognitive level of the Chinese people has become overwhelmingly degraded under prolonged bureaucratic rule, the partial opening up since the late 1970s has, after all, allowed us to understand a bit of the outside world.

Many among the Chinese commoners now possess their own independent thoughts and judgments. **Attempting to deceive and enslave them is no longer as easy as it was during Mao Zedong's era.**

In our country, resistance is spreading and evolving in this form—seemingly gentle, yet omnipresent, happening at every moment of every day. What I want to express here is that hope does not depend on its size; **its very existence is its greatest significance.**

In the second half of 2023 and the first third of 2024, it was precisely while carrying this profound sensibility toward China's unique social reality that I continued my reflections.

2, What Is Printed on a Banknote Is the Vision of an Entire Nation

The first discovery that completely fascinated me was the profound indicative nature of the figures portrayed on a nation's official currency.

Oddly enough, I have personally never actually been abroad. My only experience outside the country was briefly stepping across the border into Vietnam from Chongzuo (崇左). Therefore, I genuinely possessed very little knowledge about the currencies of other nations.

It wasn't until a few days ago, when I browsed an illustrated encyclopedia of world currencies online, that I vividly felt something astonishing: **one can categorize the nations of the world into two diametrically opposed camps based solely on the identities of the figures on their banknotes.**

The first camp of nations always strives to highlight scholars who have made outstanding contributions to science, culture, arts, and social thought in their history. Their currencies commemorate the causes of those who expanded the frontiers of human cognition and pursued freedom, equality, and human liberation.

The currencies of the second camp of nations, however, are plastered with monarchs and "supreme leaders." The regimes of these nations glorify those "great men" (伟人) who temporarily crushed people's independent thoughts using coercive power, singing praises to a society of absolute conformity and militaristic obedience (令行禁止和整齐划一).

Because my personal knowledge of various parts of the world is admittedly shallow, I will not list exactly which countries belong to the former and which to the latter. I trust that anyone able to read these words is far clearer on this than I am.

Judging by factual performance, the former category often comprises developed democratic nations, whereas the latter invariably consists of oligarchies, bureaucracies, or outright hereditary dictatorships wearing the hypocritical cloak of democracy.

The former has generated almost all the scientific discoveries and technological advancements of the past five centuries, guiding the forward direction of culture, art, and social thought. The latter, conversely, constantly attempts to borrow imported science and technology solely to consolidate their own despotic rule, while harboring deep-seated hostility and terror toward advanced culture, art, and ideology.

This divergence in the selection of figures on currencies is both the cause and the result of their diametrically opposed historical achievements.

When a society universally believes that ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) should be prioritized over ***political efficiency***—that a society desperately needs people who drive it forward rather than those who whip and herd it—this nation will naturally seek, select, and implement a sound social system. This, in turn, enables the entire nation to reap far more civilizational achievements.

The second type of society blindly worships "great men." This is not to say that there are no individuals within humanity who have achieved monumental feats. However, I maintain the belief that while a *cause* or an *enterprise* can be called "great," we should absolutely refrain from applying such a term to a *person*.

Because the greater a "hero" is elevated, the more insignificant and wretched the rest of the commoners become.

This has been proven countless times in the histories of these nations, particularly in the history of our own country. We can certainly discuss whether historical event A or event B contributed more significantly to human progress. But the moment one attempts to compare the absolute value of two human lives and pass judgment, it becomes incredibly dangerous—because such behavior effortlessly metastasizes into a total contempt for fundamental human rights.

My critique and satire of nations that print "great men" on their banknotes does not deny that politicians can also qualify as heroes. Indeed, one can easily notice that several figures on US dollar bills naturally hold the identity of politicians.

But these politicians who truly deserve to be called heroes are, without exception, individuals who valued ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) far above ***political efficiency*** (政治效率). They were people who liberated both the bodies and minds of the populace, rather than those who flaunted their power by manipulating the commoners. They were builders of society, not mere conquerors; they were men capable of restraining themselves, rather than those whose only skill was controlling others.

Pure political victory does not bring social progress, and merely defeating an enemy militarily cannot be counted as true martial virtue (武功). **The true monuments of merit are economic, institutional, and ideological legacies.**

Those autocrats who blatantly throw history into reverse simply because they are adept at waging war are nothing more than what the Chinese language calls **"thieves who steal the state"** (窃国之贼).

I cannot help but think of the former currencies of Germany, Italy, and Japan: the Mark bearing the portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm I; the Lira coin engraved with the fascist *fasces* (束棒); the Japanese Yen depicting the *Hakko Ichiu* (八纮一宇 / "All Eight Corners of the World Under One Roof") monument.

Back when these three nations—now world-class developed countries—were completely off the righteous path, how strikingly similar was the ***social consciousness*** reflected on their currencies to that of the "second camp" nations still lingering today. Yet, from the end of World War II to the present, one can clearly witness the profound introspection of the former Axis powers just by observing the changes in their currency figureheads. Even within the international system established post-WWII, these three nations have successfully transformed into respected members of the global community.

The mighty tide of the world surges ceaselessly forward. Humanity will never stagnate forever due to the sabotage of a few ambitious demagogues, nor can coercive power eternally suppress the truth.

Within the short span of just a year and a half leading up to the end of 2024, we have already witnessed the universal failures of the "second camp" nations *(referring here to their regimes)*. Some have already ceased to exist, while others have entered their death countdowns—this includes Bangladesh, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, and Syria.

There are also a few among them attempting to inch closer to civilization, such as Vietnam. I have heard that they have already implemented drastic reforms to their household registration (Hukou / 户籍) system. I sincerely hope that when the Vietnamese people look back on this step years from now, they can proudly declare it an enterprise no less magnificent than Lê Lợi pacifying the Ming (黎利平吴).

Observing global currencies did not necessarily bring me any brand-new knowledge; after all, I was already fully cognizant of the underlying mechanisms dictating the rise and fall of nations. What truly amazed me was how the massive disparities in the developmental stages of states and societies permeate every conceivable aspect of daily life so pervasively. Indeed, upon careful observation, we realize this difference is practically omnipresent.

Even on a tiny slip of paper currency, what is printed is the profound vision (见识) of an entire nation.

But why are the Chinese commoners entirely oblivious to this? After all, it was only through repeated observation, comparison, and massive reading that I managed to see it myself.

3, For a Civil Society, the Most Crucial Element is That the People Possess Basic Common Sense

I believe this is because the Chinese lack "common sense" (常识)—which is, in itself, an exceedingly fascinating issue.

Do the Chinese lack *knowledge*? Actually, they do not. The popularization of compulsory education in China is quite impressive on a global scale, and for the urban middle class *(if such a class truly exists)*, the per capita educational attainment is quite substantial.

But herein lies the sinister brilliance of Chinese education: it will indeed teach students specialized professional knowledge that they will almost never use in daily life, **yet it absolutely will not teach the common sense that is widely applicable in daily life and helps people instantly distinguish right from wrong.** Official education will systematically try every possible means to mislead the educated.

In reality, the "common sense" of the Chinese people is incredibly bizarre. If one resides in China for a prolonged period, it is not difficult to discover that the following ideologies are overwhelmingly pervasive and virtually unquestionable among our people:

- *Unification is always superior to division, regardless of the cost, and regardless of whether unification brings social progress or regression.*

- *State sovereignty supersedes human rights.* (They are completely ignorant of the concept of popular sovereignty [主权在民], believing that no matter what horrific, anti-human atrocities a government commits against its own people, other nations have absolutely no grounds to intervene).

- *Might makes right.* (Even though our government internationally appears capable of nothing but issuing verbal protests, the Chinese commoners still firmly believe that as long as a nation is powerful, it can violate international norms at will...)

Of course, citing the above three political concepts is already giving the Chinese people a lot of face. While these viewpoints are "wrong," they are at least not *"not even wrong."*

However, the ideologies held by the vast majority of Chinese people are truly impossible to even evaluate. For example, the daily barrage of absurd gibberish (满纸荒唐言)—such as "the imperial court is playing a grand chess game" (朝廷下大棋) or "the state relies on precise calculations of massive datasets" (海量数据精确计算)—sounds utterly ridiculous even to native Chinese speakers. If a foreigner were to observe this, they would find it completely incomprehensible.

Based on my observations from living in China year-round, the average cognitive level of the Chinese people today probably ranks near the very bottom among the 200-plus countries and regions in the world. **One could even argue that it is inferior to that of primitive tribes still in the hunter-gatherer stage.**

This is because, after enduring over ten centuries of ***restoration-bureaucratic rule*** (复辟官僚制度的统治), the Chinese have universally lost the capacities that can be defined as "human intelligence" (人类的智能). Their brains are generally incapable of establishing even the most fundamental logical connections between phenomena. This is an extraordinarily astonishing fact.

For instance, if we observe the tribesmen active in the northern taiga (boreal forests), it is not hard to find that even a shaman adheres to a general mode of thinking that belongs to modern *Homo sapiens*. The formation of their cognition still follows the loop of: **"Observation – Hypothesis – Fitting (拟合) – Adjustment."**

When these tribesmen see wind, rain, thunder, and lightning in their lives, or observe the proliferation and ultimate death of all things, they build concepts about the world based on this "observation." While primitive, it already possesses the capacity for imagination and structural construction that distinguishes humans from animals. When their environment changes, these

primitive humans reshape their worldview in accordance with those changes, because their old theories can no longer fit the new observational results; thus, making adjustments is inevitable.

However, if a person lives long-term in today's Chinese society, they will easily realize that the modern Chinese populace has universally lost this capacity that distinguishes modern *Homo sapiens* from animals. First, they completely fail to observe from a self-centric perspective. Second, even after observing, they generate absolutely no associative connections. Third, they never use their own cognition to fit the information they receive. Finally, even when they blatantly discover that the facts they see contradict their original cognition, **they absolutely dare not negate their old views and reshape their cognition. They simply try every possible means to deceive themselves just to survive another day.**

If a foreign observer came to live in Chinese society long-term, one glaring characteristic they would feel is that the entire nation has become accustomed to **"meaninglessness"** (无意义).

Almost no one ponders what the world is like, why they are living, or what meaningful things they should do next. The fact is, the mental activities conducted by the majority of the population possess fundamentally no difference from those of wildebeests or lions on the African savanna—that is, they have lost the characteristics that can be called uniquely human.

The Chinese universally do not know how to attain deep inner joy and satisfaction because they fundamentally do not believe their lives possess any inherent meaning. Only comparison with others can stimulate them: even if they are living quite well themselves, seeing someone else living better makes them furiously resentful; **even if their own lives are miserable beyond words, seeing someone else suffering even more makes them deeply satisfied.**

This "pathological" (变态的) social condition is precisely the result of the long-term rule of a ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家). It does not even have a clear correlation with the level of socio-economic development, because we can easily find nations that are far poorer yet possess widespread religious faith.

Take Haiti, currently viewed as one of the most thoroughly failed states in governance. The vast majority of its population practices religions like Catholicism or Voodoo. This point alone is sufficient to distinguish Haitians from the wild animals of Africa, because no wild animal engages in activities like religious rituals.

But I fear the thought processes in the brains of the majority of Chinese people genuinely lack distinction from the animals of Africa—it boils down to nothing more than *"how do I survive today."*

Therefore, rather than saying the Chinese people's worldview is flawed, it is more accurate to say that **the vast majority of Chinese people fundamentally do not possess a worldview at all.**

It is precisely this lack of common sense that renders the Chinese frequently incapable of making any effective judgments about the real world. Most fascinatingly, they lack even the most foundational concepts, such as the concept of historical development.

This might seem very strange to someone who does not live in China, but anyone who stays here for a while will feel this characteristic profoundly: **the Chinese believe that history is perpetually static.** If there is any change, it is nothing more than cyclical repetition over and over again.

Even though Marxism—the official state doctrine—fundamentally rejects this (advocating historical progression), this theory of perpetual stasis (持久不变论) overwhelmingly dominates the grassroots consciousness. When Chinese people consider the transition from one dynasty to another, you will rarely encounter even one or two individuals who realize what kind of structural social transformation has actually occurred.

For instance, when Chinese people talk about the concept of the **"dynastic cycle"** (历史周期率), they unthinkingly include some regimes prior to the Tang Dynasty in their consideration, namely the Han, Wei, and Jin.

However, if an observer uses even a single brain cell to think for just a second or two, it is not difficult to discover that the fall of these dynasties in classical China was precisely the result of ***feudalization*** (封建化). This is a fundamentally different matter from the complete collapse of social production under bureaucratic exploitation represented by the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, particularly the Ming.

The fall of the former is fundamentally no different from the fall of Rome. Could the **dynastic cycle** under a ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制) possibly apply to Rome or even European society? I am afraid anyone with a functioning brain would not think so.

If one insists on drawing a comparison with the ***restoration-bureaucratic regimes*** of ***Late Imperial China*** (晚期中华帝国), perhaps the only somewhat meaningful example is the Byzantine Empire, which survived after the East-West division of Rome.

Because if we look at the duration of a dynasty's (or family's) rule, the "dynasties" of Byzantium were noticeably shorter than the lifespans of the dynasties in those European feudal states. This fact indeed corroborates, on another level, that during its existence, Byzantium possessed a nature

similar to China's ***restoration-bureaucratic states***—that is, the entire society was trapped in an anomalous ***bureaucratic state*** where ***feudalization*** had been interrupted.

Another highly ridiculous example is the continental expansionist policy implemented by Japan right at the beginning of the Meiji period.

When Japan had just begun its Restoration, although expansionist public opinion never ceased, the entire nation had not yet determined a specific strategic direction. There were even many Japanese scholars who believed that, faced with the steady encroachment of European imperialism dominated by Caucasians, the most urgent task was to unite with neighboring countries of the same race with long histories of interaction—like China and ***Korea***—to resist the West together.

This idea was not necessarily bad. But the Japanese at that time obviously could not have realized that these two fantasized allies possessed absolutely zero possibility of spontaneously embarking on the path to modernization.

Thus, 20 years after the Restoration, the Japanese finally abandoned this unrealistic idea and adopted an extremely realistic strategy: Since the incompetence of China and ***Korea*** was beyond doubt, rather than waiting for them to be carved up by Western powers—which would leave Japan even more isolated—it would be better to leverage geographical advantages and strike first. After all, one cannot just sit back and watch others eat the meat.

For those familiar with modern social justice, this example will not cause cognitive dissonance (though it might feel somewhat awkward). But for the Chinese, it is entirely different. Because they will quickly realize that the Japanese mindset is immensely praised within traditional Chinese culture.

The absolute proof of this is that the famous *"Longzhong Plan"* (《隆中对》) presented by Zhuge Liang to Liu Bei *(a legendary blueprint for conquest during the Three Kingdoms period)* is fundamentally, substantively no different from Japan's continental expansionist policy.

Their foundational premise is identical: *forces that should not be provoked must be avoided for now; forces that have already been confirmed as useless garbage must be rapidly annexed. If you don't annex them, someone else will anyway, and ultimately, you will be the one who suffers.*

This cognitive dissonance occurs precisely because the Chinese generally do not understand concepts like the nation, state sovereignty, and international law—concepts that fully formed and gained widespread acceptance only over the last few centuries, that is to say, since the ***early modern period*** (近世).

After all, China never even finished the feudal stage; the ***early modern period*** is a social stage completely out of its reach.

The people's cognitive level is indeed virtually identical to that of the era of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang. *(In fact, it should be slightly inferior, because during the late Eastern Han Dynasty of our country,* ***feudalization*** *was already very obvious, and the lord-vassal system among local warlords already existed).*

Therefore, once the issue of Japan's expansion during the Meiji period is brought up, Chinese people generally fall into an awkward dilemma where their left brain attacks their right brain. In the end, they can only gloss over the matter by displaying the most outstanding talent of our nation: **"playing dumb"** (装傻)—which, in a sense, means they are genuinely dumb.

Therefore, I once told my friends a joke: I said that since China has had emperors up to the present day, the most advanced ideology remains the Confucianism of the Han Dynasty.

This is because you could argue that Confucianism at that time was unscientific—before Newton, probably no one could definitively establish what science looked like. You could also argue that Confucianism at that time lacked logic; on this point, China inherently cannot compare with Greece and Rome.

But Han Dynasty Confucianism possessed one quality that left all the absurd doctrines that followed entirely in the dust: **it acknowledged common sense, and it did not shy away from the existence of problems.**

The one aspect where the Han Dynasty people far surpassed contemporary Chinese is that they were at least acutely aware of this basic common sense: **when bizarre occurrences frequently manifest in society, the entire nation has obviously gone down a wicked, aberrant path.**

Consequently, we can see that intellectuals of the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties constantly used exaggerated phenomena to warn the populace. Resurrections of the dead, animals transforming into humans, or stones speaking—such things certainly do not exist. However, the fundamental concept that Han philosophy intended to convey was unequivocally correct.

Just like the *Song of the Bizarre* (《古怪歌》) and numerous bureaucratic satires from the late Qing Dynasty: if everyone feels that there is something fundamentally wrong with society, then the state has naturally plunged into some extremely severe crisis.

Such a principle—so glaringly obvious that one hardly knows how to further explain it—is actually a fact universally unrecognized by the commoners in China today.

During the summer vacation of 2023, I increasingly realized that for a nation to achieve good governance, it does not demand its citizens to possess profound or abundant knowledge; **it is entirely sufficient for them to merely possess the most basic common sense about the world.** Did Thomas Paine perhaps think the exact same way back then?

Yet, such an utterly simple demand is hopelessly out of reach for so many nations.

This is equally one of the reasons I believe it is necessary to record the things I have discovered. Even though the East Asian region, where China is located, has never been the mainstream of human civilizational development in any historical period, China is absolutely not an insignificant actor on the international stage. It is no exaggeration to say that its history throughout the BCE era was magnificent.

The collapse of this nation and its people will sound a terrifying alarm for the entire world: **Humanity spent millennia domesticating countless plants and animals, but the Chinese rulers spent a mere ten centuries domesticating *humans*.**

"Humans can be domesticated, and human intelligence can be obliterated."

This is the most profound lesson that China's tragic history leaves for posterity. Today, countries like the UK, the US, France, Germany, and Japan can be considered the vanguard of the realm. But who can guarantee that these nations, having achieved such monumental merits, are completely immune to making mistakes in the future?

Past experience, if not forgotten, serves as a guide for the future. (前事不忘，后事之师。)

4, The Chinese View of the World Is Exceedingly Naive

The Chinese commoners' lack of common sense and their static, unchanging worldview are most concentratedly reflected in their views on international politics. If a clear-headed person spends a long time navigating the Chinese internet, they will inevitably be shocked by the naive and idiotic views Chinese people hold regarding the international situation.

Comparing international relations to interpersonal relationships, making all sorts of illogical analogies, and employing a "playing house" (过家家) mindset—it leaves one at a complete loss for where to even begin critiquing them.

However, even worse than this childish, fantasy-based cognitive model is the fact that the Chinese fundamentally lack the capacity to understand how today's world actually operates.

This is because, ever since the interruption of its ***feudalization*** (封建化), China entered a mutually destructive, zero-sum ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) where no single party can benefit in the long term. Consequently, our country's commoners are completely incapable of possessing the concept of a "win-win" (共赢) scenario.

Based on their experiences in real society, they are not wrong. In our country, a person either eats others or is eaten by them. And it is almost always those who hold fast to their conscience who get eaten, while those who most thoroughly discard morals and ethics seize power.

Judging from my personal experience, in the period around the end of the pandemic, as the delusion of surpassing the United States within two or three decades vanished like smoke, the "Simplified Chinese Internet" *(*简中互联网 */ a term referring to the internet inside the mainland's Great Firewall)* once again became flooded with absurd, surreal (抽象) rhetoric about "a grand alliance of the world's people to utterly annihilate American imperialism."

The reason I call this public opinion "absurd" is not merely because abnormal, non-democratic states like Russia, North Korea, Iran, and Syria—who are simultaneously the "good friends of the Chinese people"—are viewed as the vanguard to defeat the US. It is also because Chinese commoners pin immense hopes on traditional US allies turning against America, particularly the developed continental European nations led by Germany and France.

This calculation of "uniting the many weak to attack the one strong" (合众弱以攻一强) cannot be called entirely wrong. Not only have such things occurred countless times in Chinese history, but even on the European continent in the 18th and 19th centuries, major powers strictly adhered to this principle.

The only problem is that times have changed. What the Chinese fail to realize is that the United States did not merely seize the scepter of the *"Tenkabito"* (天卡必多 / 天下人 / Japanese term meaning the "Ruler of the Realm") from its former motherland; more importantly, **it created a global order where "all people under heaven benefit"** (天下之人皆得利).

No one denies that the United States reaps the maximum benefits under the order it leads. However, this poses absolutely no contradiction to the fact that, for other nations, participating in this US-led world order is the absolute optimal solution for their own national development.

Granted, it is impossible for the United States to never decline. But as long as no other nation can replace America's role in the existing international system and do it *better*, US hegemony will continue by sheer momentum.

Since 1949, our country has drifted increasingly further away from the mainstream of the world. It is normal that the commoners have absolutely no concept of this. Like ostriches burying their heads in the sand *(though ostriches don't actually do this; it's just a cited idiom)*, they pin their hopes on the illusion that if American power becomes too strong, secondary powers like France will flip.

They are not even willing to ponder a much simpler fact: throughout the entire decade of the 2000s, America's advantage over the world was, at least on paper, even greater. Why didn't a single powerful US ally flip back then?

Whether it is the social systems of developed countries or the world order they created and maintain, they represent a complete **"dimensional strike"** (降维打击 / higher-dimensional obliteration) to the Chinese, who still harbor a peasant mindset under a bureaucratic system. **To the vast majority of Chinese people, Western developed nations have become as incomprehensible as extraterrestrials.**

I feel deeply sorrowful about this myself. Because during my thought process, I had to temporarily shelve many questions due to an extreme lack of understanding of Western society. Many crucial pieces of evidence could not be verified because of this, and whenever this happens, I cannot help but feel a profound sense of helplessness.

If the Chinese commoners remain forever obsessed with the **"Tactics" (术 / Shu / Machiavellian maneuvers)** aimed at winner-takes-all outcomes, yet remain blind to the **"Momentum" (势 / Shi / overarching historical trends)** of societal development—believing that as long as their schemes in fighting against others are shrewd enough, they can reverse the direction of human society's movement—then it is impossible for China to ever possess a citizenry capable of taking political responsibility and supporting China in becoming a great, or even powerful, nation. Consequently, the entire country will remain hopelessly devoid of a future.

5, It Is Easy for People to Be Influenced by Various Concepts Due to Their Environments

Whether it is the Chinese people's ignorance of Western society or the citizens of Western developed countries' ignorance of Chinese society, both vividly demonstrate the formidable power of **concepts (观念)**—a point that I find utterly astonishing.

In fact, I can distinctly feel that the barrier standing between the Chinese and Westerners is by no means merely a lack of factual understanding. Rather, it is the reality that even after acquiring sufficient evidence, **people find it impossible to imagine or concede the very possibility that "such a society" could actually exist.** *(I will likely elaborate on this point later).*

Previously, when I was researching why the excessively powerful bureaucratic system of the Western Han Dynasty could be established so rapidly within a short period, I profoundly experienced, for the first time, the massive influence that concepts exert on people's judgments.

Because if we stand in the present day—taking an objective perspective 2000 years later, rather than adopting the perspective and limited information available at the time—it is a fact that the Xiongnu (匈奴) were powerful, and it is a fact that they posed a threat to the Han Dynasty. **But they were absolutely not as powerful as the Han Dynasty perceived them to be.**

The perceived invincibility of the Xiongnu within the minds of the Han people was deeply rooted in the people's ignorance of the world at that time, their lack of understanding of the enemy, their dread of being encircled, and their subjective feelings regarding the balance of power and the trajectory of the threat.

Speaking with the benefit of hindsight (以马后炮的角度来说), by 120 BCE, the Han Empire had practically already expelled the Xiongnu from the mixed agricultural-pastoral zones and opened the route to the Xinjiang region. Under such circumstances, it was highly unlikely for the Xiongnu to evolve further into a massive empire with a mixed mode of production; the probability of their continued political development had become exceedingly slim.

If the Han armies had simply ceased their deep, relentless pursuits from that point onward, maintaining a military standoff along the Han Great Wall supplemented by political maneuvering (政治调略), it would likely have only been a matter of time before the Xiongnu ultimately fractured. After all, although the Xiongnu possessed certain extraordinary qualities, they could not possibly transcend the social realities dictated by their nomadic **mode of production**. Therefore, there was an overwhelmingly high probability that the Xiongnu would no longer possess the power to subvert Chinese civilization *(at least until **feudalization** (封建化) began)*.

If we envision this historical possibility, we realize that the Han armies could have avoided several decisive clashes of their main forces, especially disastrously failed campaigns.

Furthermore, noticing that measures massively expanding government power—such as the state monopoly on salt and iron (盐铁官营)—only appeared *after* the decisive battle in Mobei (漠北决战 / the Gobi Desert), there is every reason to believe that **the Han bureaucratic system under that alternative choice would never have become as powerful, resilient, and capable of self-repair as it did in *our timeline* (本位面).**

(I state this based on some far more granular historical facts. For instance, Gongsun Hong [公孙弘], a supremely important political figure during Emperor Wu's reign, passed away in 121 BCE. Coming from a humble background, Gongsun Hong was only promoted due to the emperor's appreciation after he was over fifty—which perfectly aligns with the general laws of the ***classical bureaucratic period****. He was the first Chancellor [丞相] to be made a Marquis upon appointment, and according to historical records, the last Chancellor during Emperor Wu's reign to be deeply involved in political decision-making. Therefore, Gongsun Hong's death carries an indicative significance: it fundamentally signifies the completion of the separation between the Inner Court [内朝] and the Outer Court [外朝] during Emperor Wu's era.* ***The Chinese bureaucratic system officially detached itself from the classical bureaucratic structure—this was one of the most critical events in the developmental history of the Chinese bureaucratic system.*** *However, because time cannot flow backward, I usually do not meticulously explain the reasons behind my hypothetical speculations. After all, these hypothetical scenarios can never actually occur anyway.)*

When *feudalization* genuinely occurred, China might not have inevitably walked down a dead end exactly as it did in *our timeline*.

Even from the emperor's personal perspective, it would have been beneficial: if the empire's "gear shift" (换档) had occurred early, at least the probability of the tragedy of father and son turning against each other in his later years would have been significantly reduced.

However, we today know vastly more than the people of that era could have known. The Han people simply had never seen such a colossal nomadic empire, let alone possessed any understanding of world history.

The decisions made during the latter half of Emperor Wu's reign reflected the overarching concept forged by the Han people over nearly a century of coexistence with the Xiongnu: **when there is a chance to annihilate this formidable enemy, one must absolutely never show mercy.**

Because the Xiongnu had previously inflicted far too much humiliation upon the entire nation, forging an overwhelmingly intense psychological pressure. And because the entire nation had already sacrificed far too much to defeat the enemy, no one was willing to gamble on whether adopting a relatively conservative strategy now might allow the enemy to rise from the ashes.

We can even clearly see that, many years after Liu Che's (Emperor Wu's) death, military operations involving multiple Han armies marching simultaneously across the Mongolian Gobi to seek decisive strategic battles continued to exist. And the ideology regarding the Xiongnu as the ultimate enemy—*"Those who offend our Han nation shall be executed, no matter how far away they are."* (虽远必诛)—persisted straight through to the late Western Han period.

This consciousness of constantly seeking decisive battles in hopes of utterly erasing the Xiongnu as a political entity clearly possessed a massive foundation within Western Han society. **This was precisely the concept formed through long-term interaction between the Han and the Xiongnu.**

Therefore, it is absolutely not absurd to conclude that this "concept"—which appears inaccurate to later generations—catalyzed the formation of an overly bureaucratic and highly centralized empire, **thereby permanently separating the historical trajectory of *East Asia* from other regions of the world.**

Because even today, we can effortlessly point out just how profoundly concepts influence people's cognition.

For instance, during the nearly half-century of the Cold War, did the Soviet Union—or the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc—possess the actual strength to rival the United States at any given moment?

The answer today is obviously: **Absolutely not. Not even for a single day.**

The Soviet regime was essentially a recently formed ***restoration-bureaucratic regime*** *(referring to its formation during the transition between the feudal and* ***capitalist societies****)*. Although it could temporarily drive massive human and financial resources into a specific sector through coercive power—managing to produce some superficially glamorous achievements despite abysmal efficiency and astronomical attrition—such a society and such a political system inherently possessed zero possibility of securing victory in a prolonged competition with the United States.

Its ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) was far too low, and the forward direction of human society is not something a few high-level technocrats (技术官僚) can accurately foresee. Even in terms of technological innovation, the Soviet Union was forced into a position of trailing behind the West, only to be left further and further behind.

As for the threat of nuclear war, it is even more laughable. How could these extravagantly decadent privileged cliques (穷奢极欲的特权集团) possibly have the courage to risk seeing their luxurious lives instantly annihilated by actually initiating a nuclear war? Today, a year and a half into Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russia has made nuclear threats more than once—but who still believes them?

We today can certainly say without blushing that believing the Russians were capable of rivaling the West back then was an absolute joke. However, when people of that era saw the Russian satellite go up into space first, or saw the massive military exercises conducted by the Soviet Union and its satellite states (仆从国), they did not think so.

NATO's heavy emphasis on the Soviet Union was not fake; the nuclear war prevention drills conducted by many Western European nations were not fake either. When people are situated right in the midst of the historical process, it is inherently difficult to judge where the world is heading. If one lacks a holistic grasp of the historical processes humanity has experienced thus far, attempting to make an accurate judgment is truly a fool's dream.

Therefore, whether it was the peoples of various Western European nations or the governments of the Western bloc led by the United States, **what they were attempting to combat was a Soviet Union constructed of "concepts" (**观念中的苏联**).** As for the true, self-unsustainable Soviet Union, it likely would not have survived a few extra years even if the US and other nations hadn't expended so much grueling effort.

Perhaps the most enduring and famous example of concepts influencing people is the **cavalry**.

Not long after the cavalry emerged on the historical stage as an independent military branch, the ancient Greek military commander Xenophon (色诺芬) explicitly pointed out that cavalry was not something to be feared.

When facing a cavalry charge, soldiers naturally fear being trampled by warhorses. But a cavalryman is not operating an emotionless machine; the horse he rides is fundamentally terrified of crashing into infantrymen. For a horse, suffering even a permanent leg injury—let alone a fatal wound—is virtually indistinguishable from a death sentence. Therefore, when cavalry recklessly charges toward the enemy, the horse itself will instinctively attempt to evade.

Xenophon astutely pointed out that not only should infantry not fear cavalry, but cavalry should actually be more terrified of infantry. Because the infantryman stands upon the solid earth, whereas the cavalryman must fear falling off his horse. *(Of course, we must comprehensively note that during Xenophon's era, certain horse tacks crucial for cavalry warfare had indeed not yet appeared).*

European military strategists and military manuals from the 16th to the 19th centuries repeatedly mentioned this exact point. One could say that at the very dawn of the cavalry's appearance, Xenophon had already seen right through this military branch: to counter a cavalry charge, all one needs is a well-trained infantry force whose formation will not waver in the face of enemy intimidation. The anti-Jin armed forces that achieved illustrious military exploits during the transition between the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties in our country are a perfect example.

Yet, despite this military branch being thoroughly analyzed the moment it appeared, one can find that in countless battles over two millennia, cavalry succeeded in shaking enemy formations. Many times, this was not even achieved through the highly efficient method of mounted archery (弓马骑

射), but merely through intimidation charges (威吓式的冲锋), which alone were sufficient to throw poorly trained enemies into sheer panic and disarray.

This is an incredibly fascinating phenomenon.

When Xenophon commanded his Greek mercenaries fighting across various regions, Greece was still in the glorious era of numerous city-states. An army of heavy infantry composed of *city-state citizens* naturally and effectively restrained cavalry.

However, during the early-to-mid stages of ***feudalization***, in regions that had not undergone ***feudalization***, or in regions like China where ***feudalization*** had been abruptly interrupted, obtaining an army with formidable military discipline was no easy task. Wars were frequently fought between forcibly conscripted rabbles (被强行征发的乌合之众).

Against these massive but utterly low-quality armies, the cavalry of the **military aristocracy** could naturally secure victories like a hot knife slicing through butter. These battle outcomes, in turn, exacerbated people's terror of cavalry.

In fact, although I am not entirely familiar with how the European commoners view this now-obsolete military branch, I can say with absolute certainty that **the cavalry in history as perceived by the Chinese must be infinitely stronger than as perceived by the Europeans.**

This is because there are simply far too many examples of China's bureaucratic empires being crushed in absurdly pathetic ways by ***barbarians*** who had undergone a certain ***degree of feudalization***.

In the subconscious minds of many people in our country, the moment elite cavalry charges, the victory is already sealed. They cannot even comprehend why mounted archery is actually the most efficient combat method for cavalry. *(Theoretically, for cavalry to charge directly into formed infantry carries an exorbitant cost and enormous risk. But because the armies of the Chinese Empire were always massively bloated yet completely incompetent [大而无当], if the enemy adopted this counter-intuitive tactic, it often yielded spectacular results!)* Consequently, military forums in our country are constantly obsessed with heavy cavalry.

In this way, the physiological terror brought about by a cavalry charge magnified through the accumulation of historical facts into a concept that *deified* the cavalry—and in China, this concept became exceptionally entrenched.

Therefore, it is truly not a rare occurrence for people, trapped by instinctual perceptions or the limitations of the facts they recognize, to generate erroneous concepts, and subsequently be shackled by these false concepts into making disastrous decisions.

Frequently reflecting on one's own standpoint and earnestly considering whether there is missing information is truly an absolute necessity.

6, The Chinese People Have Not Realized the Massive Opportunity Costs in Political Decision-Making

During my short internship in the summer vacation, I was required to read the 2023 China Economic Report by CICC (China International Capital Corporation). It was truly a document brimming with absurd gibberish (满纸荒唐). In hindsight, out of their ten predictions for the Chinese economy, nine were completely wrong. Because the arguments within were simply too *"not even wrong,"* I will not waste words on them here; anyone curious can easily find this report.

In late August, my family took a short trip to Yangzhou and Zhenjiang. I had visited Zhenjiang before, but in Yangzhou, I visited the **Grand Canal Museum** (大运河博物馆).

People from free societies might find it incredibly hard to imagine who would ever sing praises for such a project, but that is exactly what happens in China—and the Chinese commoners are completely oblivious to the absurdity of it. Merely to sustain the existence of the ***absolute monarchy*** and the bureaucratic system itself, how many lives were extinguished to build this canal? To maintain this canal, the Yellow River was forced to change its course southwards for 500 years, triggering man-made natural disasters that killed countless commoners across the Huang-Huai (Yellow-Huaihe) plains.

It is deeply thought-provoking that a project built upon such immense civilian suffering could be successfully inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (联合国教科文组织世界文化遗产名录). This inevitably makes one reflect on exactly what kind of historical values the organization intends to convey to the world when designating cultural heritage.

It was precisely these two things that gave me a deeper understanding of the **"art of language"** (语言艺术) the Chinese rulers use to deceive the commoners.

The brilliant malice of this art lies in: **Only talking about benefits while completely ignoring costs; and if costs must be discussed, implicitly burying all hidden costs—especially opportunity costs.**

If one lives in China long enough, it is very easy to notice these propaganda tactics. The imperial court has always reported only the good news and suppressed the bad. It will only tell the commoners what they have "gained," yet it will absolutely never tell the people how many inherent rights they had to surrender to acquire it.

In fact, through observing Chinese history, I discovered that in political decision-making, **opportunity cost (**机会成本**)** is likely the most critical factor to consider; its importance even surpasses explicit costs. Yet, within the general cognition of the Chinese people, the very concept that political decisions carry opportunity costs is virtually non-existent.

But it is so glaringly obvious: when you adopt certain decisions, it inevitably renders you unable to execute other decisions. Aligning with certain countries may offend others; co-opting one interest group will plunge you into hostility with another. Not to mention that a state's administrative capacity is finite; human resources, financial resources, and time are never infinite. **"Having your cake and eating it too" (**既要又要**) is fundamentally impossible in politics.**

Although history harbors countless possibilities, only one can ultimately manifest into reality. This is the inescapable reality decision-makers face.

Therefore, I actually believe that the "National Focus Tree" (国策树) mechanism in Paradox Interactive's games like *Hearts of Iron IV* and *Europa Universalis IV* holds definite merit. No matter how much players might mock it, one cannot ignore how simply and clearly this mechanism reflects basic political common sense: **many paths are inherently mutually exclusive.**

The Chinese imperial court is masterfully proficient at deceiving the commoners. The absolute pinnacles of this deception are undoubtedly the **Civil Service Examination (**科举**)** and the **Grand Canal (**大运河**)**.

The lies surrounding these two have not only successfully brainwashed the commoners living under the Chinese government's rule, but have even hooked a massive number of foreigners.

The so-called Civil Service Examination is, in essence, the ultimate practice of Shang Yang's legalist doctrine aimed at achieving **"All benefits must flow from a single source"** (利出一孔).

The ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) not only monopolized the distribution of all social wealth, but also, through the imperial examinations, injected an endless, brutal competition for distribution rights into the entire society. It indeed brought temporary stability to the entire empire, **but this stability was achieved at the permanent cost of sacrificing social development.**

Actually, I believe that if anyone were to genuinely and seriously read the examination papers of the top scholars (状元卷) from the palace examinations of the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, it would not be hard to realize that these papers are nothing but "shining gold on the outside, rotting cotton on the inside" (金玉其外，败絮其中).

Let alone finding a single genuinely meaningful insight or proposal, just the nauseating sycophancy—such as *"My Emperor, you surpass the Five Emperors and transcend the Three Sovereigns"* (六五帝而四三皇)—is enough to make any reader with an independent personality unable to stomach reading further.

This malicious mechanism—designed entirely to maintain the autocratic ***bureaucratic state*** by dividing the ***landlord class***, exhausting the intellectuals' mental energy, imposing ideological control and public opinion guidance, and conducting obedience training—is nonetheless presented with overwhelmingly positive imagery in our country's official doctrines, and is even lauded as a symbol of China's "advancement."

And the reason the imperial court manages to pull off such a black-and-white reversal is heavily reliant on its first core propaganda technique: **"The Tactic of Historical Slicing"** (切割术).

That is to say: *"The original intention of this thing was good, but it was just executed poorly after [X person/era]."*

I believe anyone who has lived in China for a long time has heard this propaganda so often that their ears have grown calluses. The truth is, these so-called "originally good" things were inherently imbued with evil intentions from the very first day.

The viewpoint that the imperial examination system of the Tang and Song Dynasties was "advanced and progressive," while that of the Ming and Qing Dynasties was "backward and reactionary," is pure delusion.

As I just mentioned, anyone who takes even a cursory glance at the surviving examination papers across the dynasties could not possibly believe such idiocy. Whether in the density and standard of sycophancy, or in the crimes of acting as the emperor's accomplices (为虎作伥), there is absolutely no evidence that the top scholars' papers from the Tang and Song eras were any less atrocious than those from the Ming and Qing.

The representative of the former is the paper by Wu Shidao (吴师道), the top scholar in the fifth year of the Chuigong era of the Tang Dynasty; the representative of the latter is the infamous

"Centralizing Power" (揽权) paper by Wang Shipeng (王十朋), the top scholar in the 27th year of the Shaoxing era of the Southern Song Dynasty.

The introduction of the "Eight-Legged Essay" (八股文 / Baguwen) format during the Ming and Qing Dynasties was nothing more than codifying the sycophantic writing phenomena that already existed in the examinations. **How could anyone possibly argue that the imperial exams did not imprison thought before the Eight-Legged Essay, but suddenly began imprisoning thought after it?**

And the second core technique lies in entirely stripping the commoners of their ability to even *imagine* that alternative historical possibilities exist.

This is the very essence of human domestication orchestrated by the Chinese ***bureaucratic state***, far surpassing the machinations of Dr. Goebbels in Nazi Germany.

A demonic architect who masterfully synthesized the arts of human subjugation like Shang Yang (商鞅) would never bother struggling with how to deceive the commoners into believing propaganda. Instead, he struck directly at two fundamental points: **First, entirely destroy the ruled subjects' capacity to think; Second, ensure they remain completely ignorant of everything.**

When human beings no longer possess human intelligence, merely moving according to prescribed protocols like mechanical cogs within the vast ***bureaucratic state***, the imperial court's deception can no longer even be called "deception."

It is exactly like the current global obsession with AI. If we intentionally use linguistic traps when conversing with an AI program, and the AI appears to fall for them, can we say we have "deceived" the AI? I am afraid not. Because Artificial Intelligence currently possesses no self-awareness, and how can an entity devoid of self-awareness possibly be "deceived"?

This is precisely where Shang Yang's sinister brilliance lies. When fascist rulers like Goebbels rack their brains trying to deceive the populace and replace truth with fallacy, they have already fallen into an inferior tier of tyranny.

The art of rulership in our country, however, has clearly attained the extraordinary realm of *"the greatest deception resembling absolute truth"* (大诈似信). Since the commoners are both ignorant and utterly incapacitated, whatever the imperial court dictates naturally becomes the "Truth"—because there is absolutely nothing else left that they are capable of comprehending.

This mechanism has achieved spectacular results in the propaganda surrounding the Civil Service Examination (科举). The Chinese people are universally incapable of realizing that the stability brought by the imperial exams was purchased **at the cost of sacrificing the entire nation's future.**

Yes, choosing the imperial examination system might grant a small-to-medium landlord the chance to enter the upper echelons of the bureaucracy.

But do the people still possess the opportunity to acquire massive, intergenerational social wealth through commercial enterprise and seek upward social mobility? Do the people still possess the opportunity to embark on overseas adventures, secure grand achievements, and carve out their own territories? Do the people still possess the opportunity to secure patents through groundbreaking inventions and engrave their names in history? Do the people still possess the opportunity to grapple at the frontiers of scientific theory, driving humanity's understanding of the entire universe forward, and thereby establishing themselves in the world?

We could ask endless questions like this. We can ask about absolutely any divergent outcome between these two worlds in the ***modern era***.

Yes, by choosing the imperial examination system, you indeed acquire highly trained, obedient bureaucrats like Zhang Juzheng (张居正). **But you will never have Yeoman farmers (约曼农); you will never have a Columbus; you will never have a Newton; you will never have an Edison.**

Yes, you can certainly construct immortal engineering marvels like the Grand Canal. **But you will never have a Venice or a Sakai (堺); you will never have the University of Bologna** *(Though one must note that modern universities tend to excessively trace back their histories, and Bologna is clearly no exception. However, because the propaganda of Italian nationalists was so successful, I still use it as an example here)*; **you will never have the Amsterdam Stock Exchange; you will never have the candlestick charts (K 线图) of Osaka.**

The rulers of the Chinese Empire achieved an astonishing victory here. They tossed the ruled subjects petty favors, yet never let them realize that these petty favors were bought by sacrificing their vastly broader developmental interests.

It is exactly like a house crammed full of people. The emperor barricades the door, seals all the windows, and even blocks the chimneys and the drains, putting everyone inside at risk of suffocation. **Then, you chisel a dog hole in the corner of the wall and shout inside: *"Crawl out! I grant you freedom!"***

Consequently, the people inside bash each other's heads in, bleeding profusely over who gets to crawl out of the dog hole first, all while continuously shouting "Long Live the Emperor!" and praising his supreme sagacity and benevolence.

Whether looking at the physiological traits of their cerebral activity, or their social traits as members of a community, the Chinese have gradually ceased to qualify as humans. Instead, they have become indistinguishable from the cormorants (鱼鹰) trained by fishermen in southern China. **Since the dawn of creation, no nation has ever been so utterly tragic.**

The Grand Canal is the exact same kind of example. Even if you completely disregard the lives and deaths of the tens of millions of commoners sacrificed in vain solely for grain transport (漕运)—even looking at it purely from the perspective of historical development: the Chinese constructed the most "outstanding" inland canal in human history, and then what?

Then we lost the oceans that cover seventy percent of the Earth's surface!

Even a nation like Oman could set sail during the Age of Discovery and at least share the stage with global powers. Yet China's rulers harbored deep hostility even towards their own desperate commoners who were forced to seek a living at sea, and sat completely paralyzed as the foreign powers steadily encroached upon them.

Even a pure statist who treats human life like disposable weeds would likely have to think thrice before daring to praise the Grand Canal.

This is also exactly why China so frequently traps itself in the utterly humiliating predicament of **"Winning, winning, winning, until finally losing everything."** *(This phrase is believed to have originated from a speech by Zeng Shiqiang and later became a ubiquitous meme on the Chinese internet).*

Logically speaking, if a person or a nation truly "wins, wins, and wins" all along the way, it is mathematically and logically impossible to suddenly suffer total annihilation. The reason the Chinese believe they "won their way right into total defeat" is simply because they never actually won in the first place; they were merely scoring psychological victories (精神胜利) exactly like Lu Xun's Ah Q.

However, the problem is that the Chinese behaving like Lu Xun's Ah Q is not intentional. Rather, it is because the Chinese populace has universally lost the cognitive capacity to understand what "winning" and "losing" actually mean.

If we compare political decision-making to an **"optimization problem"** (最优化问题) in mathematics, it is not difficult to see just how pitiable the Chinese are in their understanding of these issues.

The so-called political decision-making process is fundamentally the problem of determining a solution within a **"feasible region" (**可行域**)**.

What kind of feasible region is this? This question is highly complex. It could be the feasible region for the ruler's personal interests; it could be the feasible region for a specific ***stratum*** or class; it could be the feasible region for the current regime; or it could be the feasible region for a civilization based on a specific society.

Which feasible region a participant in the decision-making process bases their thinking upon is highly dependent on their standpoint, their environment, and their own ideology.

Therefore, a feasible region can be defined as follows: *For the decision-making entity as a whole, its feasible region is the union (*并集*) of all choices through which its core concerned interests can still be maintained for a certain period.* The reason the term "feasible" (可行) is adopted is simply that as long as a decision is made within this scope, the core interests focused on by the decision-makers can be sustained. In other words, the feasible region does not immediately become an **empty set (**空集**)**.

The feasible region itself shifts continuously over time. The causes driving its transformation are precisely the objective laws of societal development and the accumulated weight of historical decisions.

For rulers, the solution they select within the feasible region is almost always the **optimal solution (**最优解**)** tailored for a small, self-centric clique. The more autocratic a country is—and the less its decisions reflect the broad opinions of the populace—the greater the chasm between the optimal solution for the ruler's small clique and the optimal solution for the overall interests of society.

This chasm constitutes an astronomically massive "opportunity cost" (机会成本**).**

Because only one decision can be executed at any given moment, if the ruler constantly chooses the optimal solution for their small clique while entirely discarding the overall interests of society, the catastrophic damage inflicted upon the society is glaringly obvious.

Thus, one can easily understand why the Chinese spend all day shouting "win, win, win," only to end up losing absolutely everything. It is nothing more than a corrupted definition of "winning."

Autocratic regimes deceive their citizens into believing that *any* **feasible solution (**可行解**)** is a "win." But a true "win" is choosing the optimal solution for society as a whole *(which is exceedingly difficult)*, or at least a solution that very closely approximates it.

The terrifying nature of opportunity costs in political decision-making lies in the fact that macroscopic human society is a space-time continuum. Policies are executed continuously from their enactment until their actual repeal. **The opportunity costs existing at every single moment continuously integrate and accumulate along the entire timeline.** The ultimate result will be staggering.

For those who do not subscribe to apocalyptic theories, if decisions consistently approximate the optimal solution for the whole society, the feasible region will perpetually exist, and the society will continuously progress forward.

However, if every decision deviates massively from the optimal solution for the whole society, a specific scenario easily arises: **at a certain moment, the feasible region begins to collapse and shrink drastically.**

For the rulers, the ruling clique, or the current regime, the feasible region might ultimately become an **empty set**. In other words, society undergoes a total collapse, and a regime change occurs.

It is exactly at this moment that those clueless, foolish Chinese people suddenly realize they have "won their way right into total defeat." But in reality, they had never won to begin with.

I wish to point out that finding a "feasible solution" for a society is fundamentally not difficult at all. The realm has never lacked talent; no one should improperly belittle themselves.

If one observes every dynasty in Chinese history, it is not hard to discover that at the beginning of these dynasties, the members of their core ruling circles mostly originated from an area no larger than a modern prefecture-level city (地级市).

It is exactly like how some regimes constantly trumpet the massive construction achievements they've made over the past few decades, boasting about their "brilliant leadership" and "correct path." **Yet, they will absolutely never tell the commoners how much change occurred in other countries and regions during that exact same period.** This is deliberately designed to prevent the people from ever realizing the difference between a mere "feasible solution" and the true "optimal solution."

Selecting the **optimal solution** for the entire society is vastly more difficult. It requires the leadership of a sufficiently advanced and powerful class. Sometimes, it also relies on the participation of a few extraordinary heroic figures, and a fair amount of sheer luck is indispensable.

For those **tyrants** (僭主) whose primary business is the preservation of their own privileges, not to mention their lack of will, **these vulgar and shallow-minded creatures** (鄙陋之徒) simply lack the necessary capability even if they desired to do so.

7, The Qing Rulers' Astute Distinction Between Two Types of Bureaucrats

Recently *(referring to mid-2023)*, the classic 1999 historical drama *Yongzheng Dynasty* (《雍正王朝》) caught fire again on internet platforms, though its popularity as a classic has never really waned. While swiping through various spoof videos adapted from *Yongzheng Dynasty*, I began to notice an issue I had known about before but had not given much attention to: the distinction between the appellations of **"Minister" (臣 / Chen)** and **"Slave" (奴才 / Nucai)** during the Manchu rule over China.

The popular explanation is that Han Chinese officials generally referred to themselves as "Ministers," whereas officials within the Eight Banners (八旗) system referred to themselves as "Slaves." Of course, this is a very generalized and imprecise explanation. For example, when Manchu and Han officials jointly submitted a memorial to the throne, all co-signers had to refer to themselves as "Ministers," because a joint memorial did not represent a private viewpoint.

I have no intention here to meticulously dissect the exact rules governing the application of these two appellations, let alone the inevitable exceptions that broke these rules in actual history.

What truly caught my attention is that this distinction in titles was not merely used to determine the degree of intimacy with the emperor; more importantly, **it indicated a division of labor within the Qing Dynasty's ruling structure.**

I believe this was based on the Qing rulers' observation of Ming Dynasty history. Because one can easily note that for over half a century—from Nurhaci's initial uprising until the complete annihilation of the remnant Southern Ming forces—the Manchu monarchs essentially witnessed the entire process of the Ming Dynasty from its decline to its ultimate collapse.

For monarchs pursuing absolute autocracy, the history of the Ming Dynasty obviously forced them to ponder a question: *Since the Ming monarchs theoretically never lost their power, and the autocracy of the Ming Empire was stronger than any previous period in China, why was it that*

during the reigns of the final few Ming monarchs, the decisions of an emperor with theoretically unchecked power were so difficult to execute?

What the Qing rulers saw was this: although the Ming bureaucratic system could ensure the emperor completely divided the ***landlord class*** (封建地主阶级)—preventing them from forming a unified class consciousness, let alone achieving an alliance—**the entire bureaucratic system could indeed adopt a collective posture of "non-violent non-cooperation" (**非暴力不合作**).** On the surface, they would be infinitely submissive to the emperor; but in reality, these bureaucrats neither possessed the capability, nor could they possibly harbor any positive attitude toward thankless, arduous tasks.

Where the Qing monarchs were truly brilliant was that, despite being ***barbarians*** (蛮族) who conquered ***the Central Plains***, they clearly discerned that under an autocratic monarchy, there existed two distinctly different types of bureaucrats within the bureaucratic system.

The first type consists of the general administrative bureaucrats. Their function is to assist the monarch in governing. This is the inevitable result of the finite energy and capability of any single individual.

The second type belongs to a special class of dedicated bureaucrats whose sole function is to **"exceptionally maintain"** or **"exceptionally funnel"** interests *(the personal interests of the rulers, of course)*. For the former ("maintaining"), one easily thinks of espionage and military security; for the latter ("funneling"), one easily thinks of affairs like grain transport (漕运), salt administration (盐运), and imperial textile manufacturing (织造). *(The connotations here are very rich, including managing imperial estates [皇庄] and minting currency, but I will only list examples relatively unique to China).*

(Of course, if we expand our observation of the bureaucratic system, we will find that there is actually a third category of people: the "clerks/functionaries" [吏 / Li] responsible for execution at the grassroots level of society. Regarding the role played by the "Li" and the distinction between them and the "officials" [官 / Guan], some scholars in our country have already discussed this quite sufficiently in private, so I will not elaborate further here).

This distinction implies that to maintain bureaucratic rule, one cannot blindly rely solely on **rotating officials (**流官 **/ Liuguan)**.

If we view the emperor ruling the state as the master of a massive manor (大庄园主), then the bureaucrats wielding general administrative power can be seen as the **"managers"** (管家) responsible for estate management. Meanwhile, those officials exceptionally capable of protecting the master's interests or helping the master extract wealth can be viewed as the **"domestic slaves/servants"** (仆役) of the manor.

If we imagine ourselves as the master of a manor, how would we prefer to acquire our domestic slaves? Would we run to a slave market to buy slaves gathered from all corners of the earth whose backgrounds are entirely unknown to us? Or would we lean towards employing the descendants of servants who have already worked in the manor for generations?

The answer is overwhelmingly obvious. Under rational calculation, making the second choice is inevitable. **Because we know the latter's backgrounds inside out, making them far more trustworthy; and their vulnerabilities (软肋) are easily grasped, making them far simpler to control.**

This choice is highly rational for the rulers. Only when it is absolutely necessary to rebalance power, or when there is a genuine shortage of manpower, does recruiting new servants become pressing.

Therefore, we can conclude: **The "managers" of the manor must absolutely not be hereditary.** If the managers also become hereditary, the master's power will be divided. **However, for the "domestic slaves," the absolute first choice is the old retainers of the household.** For this category of roles, capability is not the primary factor to be considered; absolute loyalty and ease of control are paramount.

As the Manchus replaced the Ming Empire in ruling over China, they realized that the Ming Dynasty had not institutionalized the distinction between the roles of "managers" and "servants."

For every generation of Ming emperors, his high-level "servants" at the dynastic level—whether the Eunuch Director of Ceremonial (司礼监掌印太监) or the Commander of the Jinyiwei (Embroidered Uniform Guard / 锦衣卫指挥使)—could at best only be considered old retainers from his days as a prince (潜邸中的老人). They failed to form a cross-generational community of shared interests.

Each generation of emperors had to expend time and energy rebuilding the servant system for the grand manor of the empire. Meanwhile, for the "imperial managers" in the imperial court, it was entirely possible to form interest groups spanning two or three generations through patronage in the

imperial examinations and political marriages. Consequently, the autocratic monarch's capacity to impose his will was significantly compromised.

This phenomenon caused numerous political catastrophes in the late Ming, which clearly left a profound impression on the Manchu rulers of the time.

Thus, we can understand the drastic transformation in the essence of the "Eight Banners System" (八旗制度) as the Qing began its rule over China. When the Eight Banners system initially formed during Nurhaci's reign, its primary purpose was clearly not to maintain a massive bureaucratic system ruling over China; it was highly questionable whether Nurhaci even realized his descendants could conquer China.

However, during the process of the Manchu government consolidating its rule over China, cunning politicians like Hong Taiji, Dorgon, and Fulin quickly realized that the Eight Banners—originally a **military aristocracy** (军事贵族) group prioritizing military objectives—was exceptionally well-suited to play the role of "servant bureaucrats" within the overall bureaucratic system.

This practice ultimately endowed the Eight Banners system with new significance. Through the Eight Banners, the Qing Dynasty transformed bureaucratic China's original (relatively singular) "Monarch-Minister structure" (君－臣结构) into a distinct **"Monarch-Minister, Master-Slave dual structure"** (君－臣，主－奴二元结构).

The Eight Banners established the rules for hereditary succession among the "slaves," forming a system capable of operating normally across multiple generations. It was highly differentiated in function, with its paramount duty being to maintain and extract interests for the Manchu emperor. As for the vast majority of administrative posts, they naturally still belonged to Han Chinese officials who were not bannermen.

Judging by the results, this institutional design was extremely effective. One can clearly sense the difference between the Qing and Ming dynasties from both internal and external perspectives: namely, their tax-collecting capacity and expansionist capability. *(Of course, as we will point out later, another entirely unignorable reason is the strengthening of Western influence; the emergence of modern elements enabled the **infrastructural power** [基础性权力] of the Chinese Empire to expand.)*

Although the Qing Dynasty is now history, the concept of the "Eight Banners" (八旗) has not disappeared. For those living in the Soviet Union and states established upon its model, it is hard not to feel that Lenin's so-called "vanguard party" is merely the manifestation of the Eight Banners

in ***modern society***. The popular saying, "Of the Eight Banners, only the Plain Red Banner remains" (八旗惟余正红旗), is by no means an empty phrase.

Therefore, when people observe the phenomenon of families inheriting positions generation after generation in China's state-owned enterprises, there is truly no need to be surprised. The hereditary rights of the Eight Banners were never acquired stealthily; they were precisely permitted and deliberately promoted by the Qing Emperor.

Corruption and bribery are even more within the tolerated bounds of hidden rules (潜规则). They even serve as a deliberate act of handing over leverage (把柄) to demonstrate loyalty; the rulers will indeed push out scapegoats to be executed when necessary.

Since the Qing Dynasty, the rulers of the ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** (复辟官僚国家) have been acutely aware that eating the meat themselves while leaving a mouthful of soup for their slaves costs them nothing; only a "thief" breaking into the house constitutes an apocalyptic disaster. It is just that because many parts of the world have already embraced modern civilization, these explicit rules had to be transformed into hidden rules. Consequently, the generally ignorant Chinese commoners are becoming increasingly unaware of them, making them appear even easier to deceive than the people of the Qing Dynasty.

Another thing that provokes laughter upon reflection is that the Soviet rulers were far stupider than the Manchu emperors. They even lacked the concept of how to utilize the vanguard party—this "Plain Red Banner."

The formidable power of the Eight Banners lay in the specialization of functions: servants only do the work of servants, rather than snatching the work of the butler.

However, when the Soviet Bolsheviks ruled the state, they entirely failed to notice this point. They merely sought to blindly seize power, and before long, they fell into a situation where "the Party commands everything" and the Party and the government became indistinguishable. Little did they know that this would actually weaken their own rule; the wickedness and stupidity of the rulers are fully embodied right here.

(*Of course, people might also point out that there is a certain inevitability to this change occurring in vanguard states, simply because no matter how autocratic or bureaucratic these states are, there ultimately is no hereditary royal family—unless it is a situation like North Korea; so who are the Eight Banners supposed to serve as servants? Under circumstances of possessing power without limitations, it is almost inevitable for an organization to continue expanding its own power.*)

As of writing this, I have not yet made a clear distinction between ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) and ***despotic power*** (专制性权力). In reality, the Qing rulers' differentiation between the two types of bureaucrats perfectly conformed to the objective laws governing the different operational logics of these two powers. This represents yet another milestone in the consolidation of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). Readers will naturally understand this when they read Sections 15, 16, and 30 of Chapter XII.

Finally, people might ask this question: *Was the Qing Dynasty's introduction of the Eight Banners system into China a historical progression or a historical regression?*

I find this question exceptionally fascinating. Setting aside administrative and military capacities *(which are irrelevant to historical progression)*, the Qing Dynasty, having introduced the Eight Banners system, did indeed exhibit more ***"feudalization"*** factors than the Ming Dynasty—this holds true for both the Bannermen and the Han Chinese ***landlord class***. Going from the pure ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** of the Ming Dynasty to recovering certain feudal elements... from this angle, it seems like a slight progression.

But on the other hand, it is glaringly obvious that the Eight Banners were light-years away from true **feudal nobility** (封建贵族). It was a system heavily emphasizing personal dependency relations, thus exhibiting characteristics of a ***slavery society*** (奴隶制社会), which is obviously far more backward than a ***feudal society***.

Not to mention that this system ultimately existed merely to strengthen the emperor's personal autocracy; it was the *result* of the development of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, not a process of its disintegration.

Ultimately, ever since the Tang and Song dynasties, the evaluation criteria of "progression" or "regression" have become completely unsuitable for evaluating Chinese society.

Because evaluating progression or regression requires a coordinate system. Just like the track in a long-distance race: moving toward the finish line is progression, and moving away from it is regression. But the situation of Chinese society is that **the contestant has completely veered off the track entirely**, existing in some utterly indeterminate void.

Therefore, this kind of society can only be described as **"aberrant" (**变态的 **/ pathological)**. At most, you can evaluate whether it has become *more* "aberrant," but you cannot determine whether it has progressed or regressed a little.

Evaluating whether changes constitute historical progression or historical reaction has lost all meaning under the extreme social conditions of our country.

This society died a thousand years ago, and a dead man is neither healthy nor sick.

Even if there is anything left worth saving here, it is the *people* living on this land—absolutely not the so-called **"Chinese civilization"** (中华文明), which has long since become antithetical to human civilization itself.

8, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an Excellent Literary Work Reflecting the Panorama of the Restoration-Bureaucratic Society

The more I read our country's historical materials, the more intensely I feel two points.

The first point is that the evidence proving the Chinese Empire experienced an interruption of ***feudalization*** (封建化) and pivoted toward a ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) is simply overwhelmingly abundant. Is there a single page in the history books that doesn't scream this fact? It is merely that no one previously viewed this process from the correct perspective; thus, even though the evidence was piled right before their eyes, they remained completely blind to it.

For example, a few days ago, I stumbled upon a video on Bilibili *(a Chinese internet platform)*. The video mentioned a point I had long known but constantly overlooked: under the *Lü-ling* (Statutory) system of the Sui and Tang Dynasties, officials could acquire land—known as *Yongye fields* (永业田 / hereditary estates)—based solely on their rank within the bureaucracy. This land could be inherited by their descendants and was exempt from **taxes and corvée labor** (课役).

Let us consider that starting from the Song Dynasty, land was no longer included in the institutional salaries of officials, and that the earlier ***classical empires*** (古典帝国), represented by the Han Dynasty, also lacked the feature of strictly pegging land grants to bureaucratic ranks.

This characteristic of the *Lü-ling* state perfectly reflects the immaturity of the bureaucratic system during the early stages of its restoration. The consciousness of ***feudalization***—especially the recognition of the paramount importance of land—was still pervasive in the minds of intellectuals at that time. For a time, the autocratic monarch was simply incapable of ruling the country by relying on a bureaucratic group entirely unmoored from landed property (脱产).

*(Note: Here, "unmoored from landed property" does not mean the officials did not originate from the **landlord class** (地主阶级); rather, it means they did not rely on managing family estates to acquire and consolidate their social status, unlike the **aristocratic great clans** (门阀世族) that vanished by the late Tang Dynasty. For the landless bureaucrats of the Song and later eras, landed property was merely a financial guarantee to facilitate their entry into an official career).*

Therefore, during the Sui and Tang dynasties, the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) had to adopt a "boiling a frog in warm water" approach to slowly disintegrate the power of the **aristocratic great clans**, actively attracting and fostering small-to-medium landlords to join the bureaucratic system, ultimately achieving its robust restoration by the Song Dynasty.

The second point is that although the Chinese in the past did not understand scientific principles and scientific methods, this did not prevent the brilliant minds within our nation—those who cared deeply about the fate of the people—from realizing that this society had already embarked on an irreversible, wicked path.

Among them, the most renowned and typical example is *Dream of the Red Chamber* (《红楼梦》) authored by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) *(though he naturally only completed the majority of it)*. One of the primary reasons this Chinese literary masterpiece has profoundly moved readers for so long lies in the author's exquisitely detailed and authentic depiction of characters, plots, and social landscapes—which was inextricably linked to Cao Xueqin's personal experiences.

If we observe the social life of the Ming and Qing empires, it is impossible to ignore an issue mentioned by countless researchers: **If a family of the *landlord class* failed to achieve official rank through the imperial examinations within three generations, its decline and subsequent loss of class status were completely unavoidable.**

This is the grim social reality of the ***bureaucratic state***. Even though the ***landlord class***, as the ruling class, clearly occupied the dominant position in social production, if they did not parasitically attach themselves to the bureaucratic system, they were entirely unable to protect their wealth across generations.

Consequently, they inevitably funneled the entirety of the ***social surplus*** (社会剩余) into elevating their own status within the bureaucratic system. **This caused the effective investment ratio for science, technology, culture, and art across the entire society to plummet to near zero.**

Cao Xueqin himself, during his youth, endured the tragedy of his family's utter ruination and fragmentation due to political factors. His understanding of China's "official-centric society" (官本位社会) was etched into his very bones. It was precisely this sober, agonizing realization that culminated in *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

From a microscopic level, *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides a panoramic, dead-angle-free exhibition of the primary characteristics of the bureaucratic society in ***Late Imperial China***, illustrating exactly how this "official-centric" nature manifested in every single corner of social life.

For example, when we observe Jia Baoyu (贾宝玉)—the male protagonist of the novel—it is not difficult to discern the profound narrative subversion embedded in his characterization as someone "indifferent to official honors and career."

Contemporary readers generally view Jia Baoyu as a decadent playboy (纨绔子弟), but did he genuinely commit any exceptionally ruinous acts to squander his family's wealth? Compared to the colossal fortune possessed by the Jia clan, how could his level of "squandering" possibly deplete it all within his single generation?

In reality, anyone who genuinely understands Chinese society will clearly see Cao Xueqin's true intention: **In China, social wealth is highly concentrated within the bureaucratic group. For them, "squandering wealth" is fundamentally a non-issue; no matter how much they squander, it will never truly cause the family's ruination. The only truly fatal blow is losing power within the bureaucratic system!** This is the sheer absurdity of the society.

Therefore, although there has always been controversy in China regarding the authenticity and literary quality of the last 40 chapters in the widely circulated version (通行本), I personally hold the continuator in immensely high regard.

Because if you look at it purely from the perspective of literary prowess, he indeed falls far short of Cao Xueqin. However, judging from his grasp of Cao Xueqin's authorial intent and his profound understanding of Chinese society, the continuator was an exceptionally brilliant mind.

The last 40 chapters of the widely circulated version (The 120-chapter *Cheng-Gao* edition) perfectly captured the spirit of the book. The earlier prophetic verses (判词) had already decreed the ending: *"like birds flying into the forest, leaving behind a vast, clean emptiness"* (飞鸟投林，落了片白茫茫大地真干净). **But *how* exactly this "clean emptiness" would be achieved is the crucial factor determining whether this novel could become a monumental masterpiece.**

The four great families possessed noble titles, sprawling lands, massive industries, and infinite social connections; their accumulated wealth was astronomical. How do you write about their downfall? It is extremely simple: **"They no longer had anyone in the officialdom" (**官场上没人了**).**

Consequently, in Chapter 95 and Chapter 96 , both Wang Ziteng (王子腾) and Jia Yuanchun (贾元春 / the Imperial Concubine) died. Conversely, Li Wan's son, Jia Lan (贾兰), passed the provincial examinations (考中举人), and their branch of the family instantly ascended to heaven like the proverbial *"even the chickens and dogs rising to the sky"* (鸡犬升天).

This simultaneous plummet and ascent thrusts the absolute concept of **"official-centricity" (**官本位**)** directly before the readers' eyes. Noble titles, gold and silver, landed estates, commercial routes, social connections—all of them are utterly useless.

Just as Emperor Zhenzong of Song wrote in his *Exhortation to Learning* (劝学诗): as long as you secure an official position, all these things will naturally come rolling in; yet without official positions, they will inevitably vanish without a trace.

It is precisely this internal social structure that sharply distinguishes the society of ***Late Imperial China*** (晚期中华帝国) from the contemporaneous societies of Western Europe and Japan. Jia Baoyu had no interest in an official career, viewing the so-called "righteous knowledge" (of the imperial exams) as utterly filthy. His viewpoint was completely correct.

His personal value orientation points directly to the root cause of the four great families' decline: their loss of power within the bureaucratic system. Simultaneously, it perfectly illustrates the absolute nature of the entire society's doctrine of **"All benefits must flow from a single source"** (利出一孔).

Meanwhile, the stories of the two female protagonists and dozens of supporting characters concentratedly reflect the monistic value orientation of the entire society and the suffocating oppression suffered by every social ***stratum*** under the bureaucratic system.

In this way, *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses the decline of the four great families as the main thread to showcase the motion of such a society: **The rise, fall, glory, or humiliation of any individual or any group depends entirely—and almost exclusively—on their power within the bureaucratic system.**

Throughout human history, there has never been a literary work that so penetratingly and incisively revealed the behavioral logic of a civilization occupying one-third of the global population and sprawling across 14 million square kilometers *(at the time including **Korea** and Vietnam)*.

It factually reflects the root causes behind the so-called **"Great Divergence"** (大分流 / *quotation marks indicate my personal reservations about this term*) operating globally on the eve of the ***modern era*** regarding its East Asian branch *(excluding Japan)*: **Why, while a minority of nations and regions marched toward modernization, were others doomed to inevitably perish amidst a series of catastrophes.**

In the future, any scholar researching Chinese history will find it impossible to bypass this book.

However, the true greatness of *Dream of the Red Chamber*—its socio-historical significance—has not been fully recognized. This is deeply regrettable and immensely unfair to both Cao Xueqin and the continuator.

If one notes the global acclaim bestowed upon the Colombian literary giant Gabriel García Márquez and his works, this becomes easy to understand. If Márquez wrote the **"Magical Realism" (**魔幻现实主义**)** literature of Latin America, how is what Cao Xueqin wrote not the Magical Realism literature of ***East Asia***?!

Judging by the scale of its impact, its duration, and its reflection of the essential difficulties encountered in the development of human society, the former cannot even remotely compare to the latter; the latter deserves vastly greater attention and acclaim.

But it is tragically helpless that within the political atmosphere of mainland China, it is practically impossible for *Dream of the Red Chamber* to receive a just evaluation.

And this is precisely what makes Cao Xueqin himself truly astonishing. This sociologist, disguised as a literary author, saw through the lamentable tragedy of the society he lived in and the compatriots around him more than two centuries ago.

"Pages full of absurd words, a handful of bitter tears! They all say the author is a fool, but who understands the true flavor within?" (满纸荒唐言，一把辛酸泪！都云作者痴，谁解其中味？)

It is entirely unsurprising that he knew he was **playing the lute to cows** (对牛弹琴). Even a deafening bell cannot awaken people who have already been completely domesticated. The greatest genius in the world looks exactly like this.

As for the author of the last 40 chapters of the circulated version, I believe he was outstanding. Whether his literary grace was good or bad is simply a matter of fate; after all, rhetoric and grammar rely heavily on innate talent. But the continuator genuinely grasped the absolute soul of the entire book, which is no small feat.

For Cao Xueqin himself, how would he have wanted the continuation of his work to be handled? Would he prefer a continuation with gorgeous prose that was entirely detached from the profound social reality the book reflected, or a continuation that—despite mediocre writing—tightly gripped its socio-historical essence?

I believe the answer is obvious. No matter how magnificent the prose, it is merely an **external skin** (皮囊). Cao Xueqin likely wrote this book out of profound indignation and grief; the soul of the book is obviously vastly more important than any beautiful skin.

Chapter 10: Seasons and Political Turmoil

Much like Chapter V, this is an exceedingly brief chapter—a personal, casual daily essay. It bears no direct relation to the overarching theme of this record, and readers are free to skip it entirely.

As winter approached in late 2022, resistance movements against pandemic control measures erupted across numerous Chinese cities. This was one of the direct catalysts for the abrupt termination of the "Great Anti-Pandemic Enterprise" (抗疫大业) at the end of that year.

Profoundly moved by this, I realized that political upheavals throughout human history share an intimate correlation with the seasons. Consequently, I penned this essay in late August 2023.

Although my spare time is insufficient to conduct a rigorous statistical analysis of all major political events—rebellions, uprisings, and coups that have shaken or subverted regimes throughout human history—and I can only enumerate historical events with which I am relatively familiar, I firmly believe that if someone were to subject this issue to scientific data analysis, this conclusion would be even more comprehensively substantiated.

It is self-evident that, particularly since the advent of the ***modern era***, political upheavals exerting profound impacts on the course of human history have become highly concentrated within the three or four months of winter. For those regions yearning for a radical social transformation, **"General Winter" (**冬将军**)** stands as the most reliable and formidable ally for the vanguard riding the tides of the era.

Previously, while studying the history of the French Revolution, the name of the historical event the **"Thermidorian Reaction" (**热月政变**)** left a remarkably deep impression on me. This coup occurred during the month of Thermidor in the French Republican Calendar.

Interestingly, from a historical perspective, the sweltering summer is indeed a peak period for political turbulence. This is simply because the vast majority of human history to date has been the history of agricultural civilizations *(and since the dawn of recorded history, the temperate zones have been the mainstream of human civilization)*. Spring is primarily dedicated to sowing, and autumn to harvesting, while the bitter cold of winter makes troop movements exceedingly difficult.

For regimes situated in temperate zones, what could possibly be a more opportune time to wage war than summer? And war, undeniably, is the human activity that inflicts the most devastating destruction upon social wealth, thereby perfectly cultivating the conditions for various coups, rebellions, and uprisings.

One can effortlessly enumerate a myriad of famous or influential major political events of this nature that transpired during the summer:

- **Jacquerie (**扎克雷起义**)**, May-June 1358, Valois Dynasty, France.
- **Peasants' Revolt / Wat Tyler's Rebellion (**瓦特·泰勒起义**)**, June 1381, House of Plantagenet, England.
- **Jack Cade's Rebellion (**凯德起义**)**, June-July 1450, House of Lancaster, England.
- **Silesian Weavers' Uprising (**西里西亚纺织工人起义**)**, June 4, 1844, Kingdom of Prussia.
- ***Magna Carta*** **(**《大宪章》**)**, June 15, 1215, House of Plantagenet, England.
- **Honnō-ji Incident (**本能寺之变**)**, June 21, 1582, Azuchi-Momoyama period, Japan.
- **Kakitsu Rebellion (**嘉吉之乱**)**, June 24, 1441, Muromachi Shogunate, Japan.
- **Catherine the Great's Coup (**叶卡捷琳娜二世夺权**)**, June 28, 1762, Russian Empire.
- **Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand / Sarajevo Incident (**萨拉热窝事件**)**, June 28, 1914, Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- **Poznań Protests (**波兹南事件**)**, June 28, 1956, Polish People's Republic.
- **Night of the Long Knives (**长刀之夜**)**, June 30, 1934, Nazi Germany.
- **Isshi Incident (**乙巳之变**)**, June 645, Asuka period, Japan.
- **Xuanwu Gate Incident (**玄武门之变**)**, July 2, 626, Tang Dynasty.

- **Storming of the Bastille / French Revolution (**大革命**)**, July 14, 1789, Bourbon Dynasty, France.
- **Franco's Coup / Start of Spanish Civil War (**弗朗哥起事**)**, July 17, 1936, Second Spanish Republic.
- **20 July Plot / Operation Valkyrie (**刺杀希特勒**)**, July 20, 1944, Nazi Germany.
- **Tanglong Coup (**唐隆政变**)**, July 21, 710, Tang Dynasty.
- **Egyptian Revolution of 1952 (**埃及七月革命**)**, July 23, 1952, Kingdom of Egypt.
- **Thermidorian Reaction (**热月政变**)**, July 27, 1794, French First Republic.
- **July Revolution (**七月革命**)**, Late July 1830, Bourbon Restoration, France.
- **First Defenestration of Prague (**第一次掷出窗外事件**)**, July 30, 1419, Kingdom of Bohemia.
- **Jintian Uprising / Taiping Rebellion (**金田起义**)**, July 1850, Qing Dynasty.
- **Nanchang Uprising (**南昌起义**)**, August 1, 1927, Republic of China.
- **Jingnan Campaign (**靖难之役**)**, August 6, 1399, Ming Dynasty.
- **1991 Soviet Coup d'État Attempt / August Coup (**八一九事件**)**, August 19, 1991, Soviet Union.
- **Outbreak of the English Civil War (**英国内战爆发**)**, August 22, 1642, House of Stuart, England.

- **St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (**圣巴托洛缪大屠杀**)**, August 24, 1572, Valois Dynasty, France.

- **Hou Jing's Rebellion / Disaster of Taiqing (**太清之难**)**, August 548, Liang Dynasty.

- **Peter the Great's Seizure of Power (**彼得一世夺权**)**, August 1689, Tsardom of Russia.

- **Rice Riots (**米骚动**)**, August 1918, Empire of Japan.

- **Kannō Disturbance (**观应扰乱**)**, Summer of 1349, Muromachi Shogunate.

- **1978 Iranian Protests (1978** 年示威**)**, Summer of 1978, Pahlavi Dynasty.

- **Disaster of Baima Station (**白马驿之祸**)**, Summer of 905, Tang Dynasty.

- **Wang Geon's Coup (**王建举事**)**, Summer of 918, Later Three Kingdoms of Korea.

- **Revolt of the Ciompi (**梳毛工起义**)**, Summer of 1378, Republic of Florence.

It is glaringly obvious that many of the aforementioned events were closely intertwined with war. Had Toyotomi Hideyoshi's "Chūgoku campaign" (中国攻略) not reached a fever pitch, requiring Oda Nobunaga to head to the frontlines personally to organize a general offensive, Akechi Mitsuhide would have fundamentally found no opportunity to rebel. Had it not been for the mass conscription of garrison troops, Chen Sheng and Wu Guang would never have launched the Daze Village Uprising (大泽乡首义).

Another highly fascinating reason is that, due to the sweltering heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter, rulers of states with fixed capitals might travel to summer palaces (避暑行宫) to escape the heat, and to winter retreats to escape the cold. For states without fixed capitals, the monarch's mobile court (行在) was also highly likely to relocate during these periods.

This situation objectively cultivated the perfect conditions for political conspiracies—a dynamic exceptionally prominent in the histories of both China and Russia.

In our country, the most famous example is undoubtedly the Calamity of Witchcraft (巫蛊之祸). It was precisely because Emperor Wu of Han and his core officials were escaping the summer heat at the Ganquan Palace (甘泉宫) that both the Crown Prince's faction and the anti-Crown Prince faction birthed the idea of annihilating each other within the timeframe of a round trip, harboring the ambition of forcing the emperor to accept a *fait accompli* (既成现实). Conversely, had the emperor remained stationary in the capital, neither faction would have dared to act.

If the travel distance was relatively long, what could possibly be better than eliminating political enemies directly en route?

Because the Yuan Dynasty possessed a "two-capital royal inspection" system (两都巡幸), assassinating the emperor became exceedingly "convenient." Emperor Yingzong was assassinated on the road, and Emperor Mingzong was poisoned in the Central Capital. Both perished in late summer or early autumn, just as they were approaching their return to Beijing.

A chronologically closer example is the 1964 Soviet coup that ousted Nikita Khrushchev. However, this belongs to the category of rapidly seizing power while the adversary is far from the political center; the opposition only struck in October when Khrushchev went vacationing at the Black Sea.

However, this small peak of political turmoil in the summer simply pales in comparison to the grand climax in the winter.

Agricultural activities in the summer might not be as overwhelmingly busy as the spring sowing or the autumn harvest, but tending to the fields still requires active labor. In contrast, the winter in temperate zones is a time of genuine idleness.

Unsuitable for external military campaigns, the ruling class paradoxically finds itself with ample time to scheme and plot **"decapitation-style" coups** (斩首式的政变) right within the political center. Furthermore, extreme material scarcity and harsh environmental conditions render winter the season when social contradictions are most acutely and explosively intensified throughout the year.

As the new year begins, frequent festivals and religious activities further elevate the success rate of conspiracies.

When one observes the history of the North Temperate Zone, it is remarkably easy to notice that from the moment the weather turns distinctly cold in November, straight through to the following February, the world enters a high-tide period of political turbulence lasting nearly four months.

Below is a list of widely known or monumentally impactful political upheavals that transpired during this specific timeframe:

- **March on Rome (**向罗马进军**)**, Oct 28, 1922, Kingdom of Italy.
- **October Revolution (**十月革命**)**, Nov 7, 1917, Russian Provisional Government.
- **Beer Hall Putsch (**啤酒馆暴动**)**, Nov 8, 1923, Weimar Republic.
- **Coup of 18 Brumaire (**雾月政变**)**, Nov 9, 1799, French First Republic.
- **Kristallnacht (**水晶之夜**)**, Nov 9, 1938, Nazi Germany.
- **First Canut Revolt (**第一次里昂工人起义**)**, Nov 21, 1831, July Monarchy, France.
- ***Grand Remonstrance*** **(**《大抗议书》**)**, Nov 22, 1641, House of Stuart, England.
- **Sweet Dew Incident (**甘露之变**)**, Nov 835, Tang Dynasty.
- **Kaohsiung Incident / Formosa Incident (**美丽岛事件**)**, Dec 10, 1979, Taiwan, ROC.
- **Xi'an Incident (**西安事变**)**, Dec 12, 1936, Republic of China.
- **Coup d'état of December Twelfth (**肃军政变**)**, Dec 12, 1979, Republic of Korea.
- **Boston Tea Party (**波士顿倾茶事件**)**, Dec 16, 1773, Thirteen Colonies.
- **Decembrist Revolt (**十二月党人起义**)**, Dec 26, 1825, Russian Empire.
- **Incident of Seizing the Gate / Duomen Coup (**夺门之变**)**, 16th day of the 1st lunar month, 1457, Ming Dynasty.

- **Mutiny at Chenqiao (**陈桥兵变**)**, Feb 960, Later Zhou.

- **Incident at Gaoping Tombs (**高平陵之变**)**, Feb 249, Cao Wei.

- **Assassination of Minamoto no Sanetomo (**刺杀源实朝**)**, Feb 13, 1219, Kamakura Shogunate.

- **February 26 Incident (**二二六兵变**)**, Feb 26, 1936, Empire of Japan.

- *(Disputed)* **Shadows of Candles and Sounds of Axes (**斧声烛影**)**, Winter 976, Northern Song.

- **Spartacus Revolt / Third Servile War (**斯巴达克斯起义**)**, Winter 74-73 BC, Roman Republic.

- **Persian Constitutional Revolution (**波斯资产阶级革命**)**, Winter 1905-1906, Qajar Dynasty.

- **Shimotsuki Incident (**霜月骚动**)**, Winter 1285, Kamakura Shogunate.

- **German Peasants' War (**德国农民战争**)**, Winter 1524-1525, Holy Roman Empire.

- **Shays' Rebellion (**谢司起义**)**, Winter 1786-1787, United States of America.

- **Iranian Islamic Revolution (**伊朗伊斯兰革命**)**, Winter 1978-1979, Pahlavi Dynasty.

- **Shimabara Rebellion (**岛原之乱**)**, Winter 1637-1638, Edo Shogunate.

- **Glorious Revolution (**光荣革命**)**, Winter 1688-1689, Restored House of Stuart, England.

- **German Revolution (**德国革命**)**, Winter 1918-1919, German Empire.

- **1905 Russian Revolution (1905 年革命)**, Winter 1904-1905, Russian Empire.

- **Heiji Rebellion (平治之乱)**, Winter 1159-1160, Heian Period, Japan.

- **Secession of the Southern States (南部各州独立)**, Winter 1860-1861, United States of America.

From the aforementioned examples, it is not difficult to see that the sheer hardship of people's lives during winter massively catalyzed the dissemination of revolutionary ideologies. **Rulers thus found themselves caught in a deadly pincer movement: internal palace coups from within, and popular revolutions from without.**

But the issue obviously does not end there. At the turn of the year, the boiling point of societal discontent coupled with the relative relaxation of the state's violence apparatus provided excellent opportunities for local opportunists. In our country, many of the most infamous rebellions broke out in winter, including the Rebellion of the Seven States (吴楚七国之乱), the An Lushan Rebellion (安史之乱), and the Revolt of the Three Feudatories (三藩之乱).

As the agricultural era faded into the distance, the severe material scarcity of winter was indeed greatly alleviated—but this is merely surface-level. From another perspective, material scarcity in winter remains a reality compared to other seasons; I believe anyone who experienced China's three-year pandemic lockdown measures could never possibly forget this fact.

More importantly, with the rapid expansion of urbanization, the quantity and quality of public services demanded by winter residents have skyrocketed. For example, the stress on heating grids and power grids surges exponentially. **This renders strikes and protests by revolutionaries devastatingly effective; there is absolutely nothing more powerful than applying pressure on a government at this precise timing.**

For the rulers, an even more dire situation is that modern civilization allows ordinary people in most parts of the world to enjoy more holidays.

For instance, in the previous examples, we cited two classic coups that occurred during the first lunar month precisely because the ruler had to attend mandatory political ceremonies. The first was the **Incident at Gaoping Tombs (高平陵之变)** during the Cao Wei period. This falls into the category of rapidly seizing power while the rival faction is far from the political center. When Cao Shuang (曹爽) accompanied Emperor Cao Fang to sweep the tombs at Gaoping, Sima Yi (司马懿) seized the flawless opportunity to strike and completely took control of Luoyang. The second event

was the assassination of the *Sei-i Taishōgun* Minamoto no Sanetomo by his nephew, Minamoto no Kugyō, while visiting the Tsurugaoka Hachimangū shrine. This belongs to the category of a direct decapitation strike executed when the opponent's defenses were thinned due to attending ceremonial activities.

Unless a ruler was an absolute shut-in who "never stepped past the front gate nor the second gate" (大门不出，二门不迈) like the Wanli Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, it was practically impossible for rulers of temperate nations not to attend necessary ceremonial activities during this time, as the start of the year was universally set in winter. This inevitably manufactured perfect opportunities for coups.

However, in ancient times, this at least had nothing to do with the commoners. In an agricultural society, could peasants visiting relatives for the New Year genuinely travel hundreds of kilometers away?

However, the rapid development of society since the Industrial Revolution implies that major holidays are now accompanied by two exceedingly crucial phenomena: **intensified population mobility and heightened mass gatherings.**

Once these two factors combine with the lightning speed of modern information transmission, it inevitably causes negative public opinion to ferment and spread within an incredibly short timeframe. The people's grievances and their hostility toward the current regime escalate rapidly.

This fact has been repeatedly verified across the globe over the past century or more. New Year celebrations, religious festivals, and memorial services for specific figures frequently morph into the detonators of turbulence and revolution.

In the latter half of the last century, the world-shocking Iranian Islamic Revolution served as a classic example. At the end of 1978, during "Muharram" (the first month of the Islamic calendar), the demands to depose the Shah and welcome Khomeini back surged precipitously. Consequently, on the two days of December 10 and 11, it was reported that over 10% of Iran's entire national population participated in the demonstrations, setting the highest historical record to date for the percentage of a national population participating in a political protest.

Interestingly, because there is an annual time differential between the Islamic lunar calendar and the Gregorian calendar, a roughly **33-year "interference cycle" (**干涉周期**)** forms along the timeline. After every cycle, the major festivals and ceremonies within Islamic law will reappear in roughly the same seasonal position in the Gregorian year.

It is not difficult to notice that around 1979, a series of upheavals occurred in the Islamic world, marking the genesis of the modern Islamic revival movement and regional geopolitical conflicts. **And the subsequent Arab Spring movement erupted precisely about one cycle later.**

It is easy to observe that after entering the industrial society, the danger of summer has rapidly dissipated. For rulers, threats have become increasingly concentrated in the winter. The surging Communist and Fascist movements in the first half of the 20th century already illustrated this point.

This pattern manifested even more glaringly during the dramatic upheavals in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (苏东巨变), as well as the widespread regime changes across the Eurasian continent. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the political activities of the opposition frequently peaked in the spring and summer, and ultimately secured victory in the winter.

(Of course, this does not mean revolutionaries ceased making powerful responses in the summer; the famous Baltic Way movement occurred in the summer of 1989).

- **Kosovo Miners' Strike (**科索沃大罢工**)**, Feb 1989, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- **Resignation of Erich Honecker (**东德昂纳克下台**)**, Oct 18, 1989, East Germany (GDR).
- **Velvet Revolution (**天鹅绒革命**)**, Nov 1989, Czechoslovakia.
- **Seven-Day Revolution / Romanian Revolution (**七日革命**)**, Dec 1989, Socialist Republic of Romania.
- **Democratization of Poland (**波兰民主化**)**, Winter 1989-1990, Polish People's Republic.
- **Democratization of Hungary (**匈牙利民主化**)**, Winter 1989-1990, Hungarian People's Republic.
- **Democratization of Bulgaria (**保加利亚民主化**)**, Winter 1989-1990, People's Republic of Bulgaria.
- **Democratization of Albania (**阿尔巴尼亚民主化**)**, Winter 1989-1990, People's Socialist Republic of Albania.

- **Dissolution of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (**南共亡党**)**, Feb 1990, SFR Yugoslavia.

- **Georgian Declaration of Independence / Moves toward Independence (**格鲁吉亚独立宣言**)**, Nov 4, 1990, USSR.

- **Dissolution of the Soviet Union (**苏联解体**)**, Dec 25, 1991, USSR.

- **Rose Revolution (**玫瑰花革命**)**, Nov 22, 2003, Georgia.

- **Orange Revolution (**橙色革命**)**, Nov-Dec 2004, Ukraine.

- **Cedar Revolution (**雪松革命**)**, Feb 14, 2005, Lebanon.

- **Jasmine Revolution (**茉莉花革命**)**, 2010-2011, Tunisia.

The politics of temperate nations progress along this curve year after year: entering a perilous period starting in November, which lasts straight through to the following February.

Once spring arrives, even the most intense social contradictions will experience varying degrees of mitigation. After all, spring signifies a reduction in survival pressure. Humans are simply wired this way: even when perfectly aware that a long-term downward spiral is inevitable, any minor short-term improvement will instill the mentality of **"enduring just one more day"** (忍一天是一天).

In ancient times, there would be a secondary danger period from late May to late August, which would then ease again in the autumn. However, this has largely vanished in industrial societies.

By pointing out the seasonal cyclicality of political crises, we are, of course, absolutely not claiming that transformations *must* occur in winter or summer.

For instance, we can imagine extreme scenarios: if a rare, catastrophic drought strikes in the spring—especially if it persists after several consecutive years of prior droughts—to the point where peasants can definitively judge that survival this year is utterly impossible, they will simply rise up in rebellion right in the spring. The peasant wars of the late Ming Dynasty started exactly like this.

Alternatively, if the social pressure of an entire region has completely overloaded, and revolutionary storms are simultaneously brewing in many countries, then for the rulers, they cannot expect any amelioration of the situation even when spring arrives. The revolutions of 1848 that swept across Europe were exactly like this: they initially erupted in winter, but actually expanded massively in the spring.

In the final analysis, **seasonal changes can only serve as a catalytic force (推动作用); the internal socio-economic and political factors of a society are what are truly decisive.**

We can use a simple mathematical model to explain why political upheavals so frequently occur in winter.

Imagine a coordinate axis: the horizontal axis represents time, and the dependent variable (因变量) on the vertical axis represents the total pressure borne by the entire society.

Consider a society that has evolved into its late stage. Although the dependent variable fluctuates over time, its overall trajectory is inevitably on an upward trend.

Let us introduce a supplementary assumption: the current regime makes absolutely no policy changes, and the operational mode of society remains stagnant. This means the growth rate of the social pressure variable is a constant—or approximately, the social pressure curve can be fitted with a linear function (straight line) possessing a positive slope.

Now, let us visualize how social pressure fluctuates around this growing linear trend over time: as winter approaches, there is a distinct surge; this is followed by a minor downward trend in the ensuing spring, a relatively smaller uptick in summer, and a moderating trend in autumn.

Visually, this is the summation of a **sine function (**正弦函数**)** and a **linear function (**一次函数**)**, with the caveat that this "sine wave" consists of alternating major and minor waves.

How exactly does this late-stage society evolve? Obviously, it depends on the amplitude of the waves and the original slope of the linear trend. But regardless, if we assume this society possesses a **"collapse threshold" (**崩溃阈值**)**—meaning regime change occurs the moment the pressure curve hits a specific value for the first time—then the inherent seasonal spike in winter, superimposed onto the natural chronological accumulation of social pressure, will result in a massive, distinct leap in social pressure during the entire winter season.

From a mathematical perspective, it is entirely rational that the summer and winter seasons contribute to the vast majority of political upheavals. And as the amplitude of the summer pressure

increase dramatically diminishes *(in the industrial age)*, the timing of political upheavals becomes increasingly concentrated in the winter.

I believe this knowledge, which is practically useless to ordinary people, is actually crystal clear to the governments of major global powers. Because for a state to maintain its rule, it must precisely know when to tighten policies and when to relax them. And if the goal is to execute political subversion against another state, the timing of exerting force is paramount.

The vast majority of opposition organizational activities should be concentrated in winter, specifically clustered around the onset of winter and the New Year. As for April, May, September, and October, maintaining a minimal presence is sufficient.

Another fascinating point is that, while non-democratic regimes do not need to worry about elections, democratic states must constantly consider election timing.

In the wave of democratization following the total collapse of the Soviet Union and its bloc, many newly formed states scheduled their elections at the end of the year, in October or November. While I cannot know exactly why they made this choice, it is highly probable that the United States created a **"demonstration effect" (**示范效应**)**. Since the US holds its presidential elections at the end of the year, ensuring the new leader and government formally take office at the beginning of the following year, others simply copied it.

However, for nations in the Northern Hemisphere, elections and the onset of winter happen practically back-to-back. This astronomically spikes the probability of a rapidly deteriorating situation. China's so-called **"Color Revolutions" (**颜色革命**)** frequently transpire in the winter immediately following an election, generally triggered by opposition protests refusing to recognize the election results.

For a country like Ukraine, where the domestic situation was inherently unstable to begin with, this specific election timing naturally serves as a potent catalyst for political upheaval.

What many small nations completely fail to grasp is that just because the United States does something, it obviously does not mean they need to copy it. The international status and social welfare net of the US can indeed absorb the shock of an election around the onset of winter without triggering massive turmoil. *(Not to mention, even the US experienced the incident where Trump supporters stormed the Capitol the year before last—which happened precisely on January 6th.)*

In fact, I have noticed that not all world powers arrange their election schedules according to the US model. For instance, the French seem more inclined to hold their presidential elections mid-year. **Changing the government at the exact moment when the populace is at their most docile is clearly a stroke of political brilliance.**

Finally, it must be emphasized that the observations above are based on temperate and subtropical zones. While temperate and subtropical zones generally represent the mainstream of human historical development, tropical regions also harbor massive populations and richly diverse civilizations. The history of the tropics is naturally an inseparable part of human history. *(In fact, I myself was born in Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province—one of the extremely rare tropical regions distributed within China).*

The tropics lack the distinction of spring, summer, autumn, and winter; they only have the distinction between the dry season and the wet season. Therefore, the impact of cyclical seasonal shifts on political activities in the tropics obviously cannot be identical to that in temperate zones.

For example, during the monsoon (wet) season in India and ***Southeast Asia***, not only is transportation severely obstructed, but the very boundaries of political power actually contract. This is precisely the reason why these regions easily birthed the so-called **"Mandala system" (**曼陀罗体制**)**. Consequently, large-scale military operations would be conducted in the "winter"—after all, winter in these regions has virtually no connection to the concept of "cold."

The examples of the tropics constantly remind me of how incredibly profound and diverse human civilization is. When we observe history, it is absolutely impossible to succeed without adopting a comprehensive and holistic perspective.

Chapter 11: On Islam and Byzantium

1, The History of Islam Is Crucial, Yet Exceedingly Difficult to Study Within China

Among all the chapters I have penned, compared to those where definitive conclusions can be drawn, this is one where I fervently hope to receive professional supplementation. This is certainly not because I am unwilling to conduct rigorous research in this area, but because the objective adversities are simply overwhelming.

As China is one of the extremely few countries worldwide possessing a Great Firewall, domestic sociological research—particularly historiography—has long lingered in a state where black and white are utterly inverted. *(This is because even our government dares not publicly repudiate the fundamental values universally acknowledged by humanity, and thus can only resort to distorting historical narratives to disparage them).* Consequently, it is exceedingly difficult for residents living in China to objectively understand the historical progression of other regions.

Simultaneously, from my personal observation, the magnitude of this difficulty is clearly not uniform when examining different regions.

Excluding nations and regions currently outside China's borders that were historically controlled by China, shared the same cultural sphere, or belonged to "Historical China" *(as defined by Tan Qixiang's Historical Atlas)*—such as Mongolia, ***Korea***, and Vietnam—Japan is indisputably China's most paramount neighbor. Furthermore, the closer we move toward modern historical periods, the greater its significance becomes.

Since its state-formation stage, Japan has long been influenced by China across various domains. Following China's Reform and Opening Up, Japan poured massive investments into China, exerting an enormous cultural impact across two or three generations. Today, Japan is also one of the countries hosting the largest overseas Chinese diaspora, as well as the most favored destination for Chinese outbound tourism and consumption. Even though the social formations of the two nations are now worlds apart, their mutual interactions will inevitably be maintained at a substantial level. Therefore, among all regions outside of China, Japanese history is arguably the easiest for the Chinese people to access and comprehend.

Although Western countries—such as those in Europe, along with the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—are geographically distant from our country, the developed nations of Europe have served as the absolute pillars of human civilization since the Age of Discovery. To this day, the term "Western countries" remains synonymous with economic prosperity, social advancement, and military supremacy.

China has been swept into the Western-dominated world order for nearly two centuries since the ***modern era***. Following the Reform and Opening Up, the sheer advancement of Western nations left an indelible impression on the Chinese populace of that era. Regardless of whether catching up is

actually feasible, a vast number of Chinese intellectuals have indeed set surpassing the West as their ultimate goal, and throngs of students travel to these countries for study.

Therefore, even though current official propaganda deliberately fabricates, distorts, and cherry-picks facts to denigrate Western countries and incite public hostility toward them, there is no shortage of people in our country who harbor an affinity for these nations, and their voices can always be heard. Coupled with the colossal volume of economic and human exchanges, there are ultimately still avenues available domestically to learn about Western history. While it is hard to claim this understanding is exceptionally granular, it is fundamentally sufficient to grasp the overarching picture as a comparative supplement to research on China.

As for the Third World nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, although they are framed as our country's "friends and partners" within the official discourse, state-level research on these nations is pitifully scarce. As for the grassroots commoners, they are left entirely in the dark (两眼一抹黑) regarding these regions. From the standpoint of realist diplomacy and economic interests, such an outcome undoubtedly possesses a certain inevitability, but it is exceptionally unforgiving to anyone who actually wishes to comprehend them.

Among these Third World nations and regions, the Islamic states are exceptionally unique. This is because, whether measured by the number of adherents, geographical distribution, or sheer influence, Islam is the *only* global religion truly capable of rivaling Christianity.

Furthermore, during the ***Middle Ages*** *(referring here to the specific timeframe designated by Europeans as the* ***Middle Ages****)*, Islam and the Islamic states were unequivocally among the premier protagonists on the world stage. Therefore, if I aim to extrapolate the conclusions I derived from studying Chinese history into universal laws of human society *(if such laws even exist)*, a more profound investigation into the history of Islamic civilization is an absolute necessity.

In China, both the official establishment and the grassroots populace hold deeply contradictory attitudes toward Islam.

From the official perspective, among all religions, Islam is the sole religion that has posed an active, preexisting security threat to the Chinese regime. This fact clearly breeds a psychological vigilance against Islam within the government. Yet conversely, they pin high hopes on many Islamic nations to confront the West, thereby benefiting China.

For the grassroots populace, on the one hand, they harbor historical memories of the massive devastation wrought by Islam in the western regions of China throughout history. Consequently, they hold a deep-seated fear and hostility toward it, operating under the ancient maxim: *"If they are not of our kin, their hearts must be alien"* (非我族类，其心必异).

However, because ***social being*** **determines** ***social consciousness*** (社会存在决定社会意识), as I stated previously, China is a civilization that utterly failed to complete its ***feudalization*** (封建化). Therefore, although our country has superficially absorbed many modern elements, the actual cognition of the society remains pathologically conservative. **What Europeans today designate as the "far-right" would be considered pure "leftists" here.** Consequently, rather than finding many of Islam's ultra-conservative values repulsive, the ordinary Chinese commoners actually endorse and resonate with them.

Regardless, for the vast majority of China's non-Muslim population, our knowledge of Islam and the Islamic world is infinitesimally small.

It was not until a few years ago, when the government began championing the "Belt and Road Initiative," that domestic Islamic studies finally caught a political tailwind, translating and publishing works by local Arab scholars regarding Islam and regional history.

However, this is still woefully insufficient to alter the domestic landscape of ignorance regarding Islam—the world's second-largest religion *(and, judging by demographic trends, highly likely to become the religion with the most adherents in the future)*.

Setting aside the quantity and quality of these translations, many Middle Eastern countries currently remain in a state of mutual political hostility or mistrust, or suffer from severe domestic political crises. The state of freedom of speech and academic freedom in these countries is deeply concerning. Can we truly trust the academic standards and research outputs of these local scholars implicitly?

I must emphasize what has already transpired in China: When I, as a Chinese citizen, began reflecting on the history of my own country, I discovered that our scholars—especially the architects of the official doctrines—had fabricated countless colossal lies. They had fundamentally distorted China's blatantly obvious historical progression, all to endorse the legitimacy of the current political regime.

This experience forces me to ponder: *Could the exact same thing be happening in other countries?* For a foreigner, being deceived by the lies of scholars from another country is a perfectly normal occurrence. If we observe the current state of "China Studies" in the West, we would harbor absolutely no doubts about this.

As for myself, although I do not identify with Islam, I am not particularly averse to it either. This is not because halal food holds a significant status in the city of Xi'an. Rather, it is because I believe that while Islam might appear conservative and backward to Westerners, **relative to China, it is actually far more advanced.**

Because Islam is, at the very least, a religion that stagnated during the ***feudal period*** (封建时期); whereas China simply regressed entirely from a feudal class society back into a ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会).

For Chinese people like me who grew up in the 2000s, our perception of Islam primarily stemmed from widely popular story collections of the Islamic world, the most representative being *One Thousand and One Nights* (《天方夜谭》) and the *Nasreddin* (阿凡提) tales.

In fact, even from these distant folktales and rumors, I had already discovered that **the Islamic society of the *Middle Ages* was vastly more open than the Chinese Empire of the Tang and Song dynasties—most notably, it was not nearly as autocratic.**

When the Caliph ordered the demolition of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the local populace actually spontaneously protested the order and protected the lighthouse, forcing the Caliph to abandon the idea. This incident alone shocked me to my core. Such an occurrence would have been absolutely, fundamentally impossible in the Chinese Empire during the Tang or Song periods.

Nasreddin (阿凡提) is an even more typical example. The fact that a religious cleric could receive such immense respect and courtesy within a Sultan's court, and genuinely intervene to halt the potential evil deeds of the ruling class, is astounding. In China, the only figure bearing any slight resemblance is *Ji Gong* (济公 / the Mad Monk). Yet Ji Gong did not function as a social paradigm in the way Nasreddin did—as a religious figure operating relatively independently of secular power. Ji Gong was more of a pure, fantastical vigilante from a wish-fulfillment novel (爽文游侠).

Later, while watching documentaries introducing the Red Fort built by the Mughal Empire in Delhi, India, I learned that the Muslim Mongol Emperor of India actually constructed a small public audience hall—the *Diwan-i-Am* (觐见厅)—right next to the imperial palace. Its purpose was to allow commoners to directly express their grievances and demands to the emperor.

Although everyone knows such a mechanism could not truly be institutionalized, it nevertheless stood as a symbol and a political gesture.

What I find unforgettable is this: during that very same global eve of the ***modern era***, **what appeared next to the imperial palace in China's Forbidden City was the Grand Council (**军机处**)**—an institution whose sole purpose was to consolidate the monarch's absolute power and maximize bureaucratic ruling efficiency.

Zakat (天课 / Islamic almsgiving) was another concept that astonished my younger self. To think there is actually a ***religious doctrine*** mandating the wealthy to donate a portion of their wealth to relieve the poor. For a region like China, where religious organizations had been practically obliterated during the process of ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚国家), this concept was exceedingly difficult to comprehend.

Therefore, I feel that although Islam is universally demonized, standing in the shoes of a Chinese person who has endured **"Sinicized rule"** (中国化统治), Islam could fundamentally never be *that* terrible. **I harbor a considerable degree of confidence in just how horrifying the land I live on truly is.**

Considering the critical role Islam played in the history of human civilization and its uniqueness in historiographical research, I have set aside my own inadequacy and recorded the questions and perspectives that arose while reading Islamic history. Readers are entirely welcome to question and critique them using scientific methods; it would be even better if knowledgeable individuals could supplement this with crucial primary sources.

As for briefly mentioning Byzantium, it is because I seemingly promised in my earlier writings to supplement it later. Thus, I will briefly narrate the revelations Byzantine history has brought me, illustrating that its historical progression absolutely did not exceed the boundaries of my theoretical framework.

2, A Compromise Emerged During the Great Islamic Conquests

A highly crucial question is: During the very initial stage of the Islamic conquests—namely, within the 7th century—did the Arab nation already possess the conditions for ***feudalization*** (封建化)?

Why do I raise this question? Because it is a clear fact that the Arab Empire established under the rule of the Caliphs in the 7th century was far from a feudal state. Rather, it was an empire of a classical nature, built upon the full absorption of the preexisting ***classical bureaucratic systems*** (those of Byzantium and Sassanid Persia) in ***the Middle East***. *(Perhaps the term **Near East** /* 近东 *is more historically appropriate for events of that era, but I will uniformly use the modern designation "**Middle East**" in the following sections).*

Certain historical facts vividly demonstrate the bizarre nature of this entire process. When the second Rashidun Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (欧麦尔), rapidly conquered Persian and Byzantine territories, the Caliphate explicitly mandated that Arab Muslims were strictly prohibited from owning land in the newly conquered territories outside the Arabian Peninsula. Instead, a nearly egalitarian distribution method was adopted for war spoils and the tax revenues of the newly conquered lands, enabling the conquerors to reap economic benefits.

In my view, this behavior somewhat resembles the Manchu Eight Banners, where military democratization was more pronounced. But even so, was such a strict prohibition on land ownership excessively extreme?

Subsequent facts indicate that this event cannot be entirely explained by the Arabian society being "too backward" to possess the intrinsic drive for land appropriation. Because after the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty (伍麦叶王朝), this prohibition had already been breached; the Arabs always found ways to acquire land in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and even Egypt.

On the other hand, even if the Arabs lacked the sufficient conditions for ***feudalization*** at the onset of the conquests, this does not prevent us from making the following judgment: **In the initial stages of the conquest, the Muslim rulers struck a compromise with the conquered populace—a compromise strikingly similar to what occurred in China.**

This is because, even though social conditions possess attributes of natural evolution, human beings can absolutely utilize subjective agency (主观能动性) to accelerate and actualize their emergence.

For instance, when we note the various Germanic tribes first breaching the Roman borders, did they truly possess the sufficient conditions for ***feudalization***? The fact is, the social developmental level of these tribes was far inferior even to that of the Arabian Peninsula when Muhammad first began preaching.

Southern Arabia possessed relatively superior conditions for irrigated agriculture, with state regimes existing for a millennium. Although the central region was essentially a desert studded with oases, trade networks permeated it, rendering the region's interactions with the outside world quite substantial. The Arabs had already been influenced by Judaism and Christianity. In the 6th century, regimes like the Kingdom of Kindah (肯德王朝) had already begun attempting to unify the Arab tribes of the central and northern peninsula, and tribal communal ownership and blood-tie systems were moving toward disintegration.

These facts amply demonstrate *(and the relevant works I have read explicitly concede)* that on the eve of Muhammad's creation of Islam, the era was indeed calling for a unified Arab nation-state. Islam was born precisely to adapt to this overarching historical momentum.

This makes things all the more perplexing: **Since what the era called for was an Arab nation-state, why was the final outcome a classical Caliphate?**

A prominent characteristic of a ***classical state*** is that it is a **universal empire** (普世帝国). Rome and Persia go without saying, but even the Qin and Han empires were exactly the same—it is merely China's subsequent historical trajectory that makes it so easy for people to forget this point.

From Emperor Gaozu to Emperor Wu, the Han Empire centralized the ancestral sacrifices of the various former vassal kingdoms in Chang'an. Emperor Wu even had to continuously employ the strategy of frequent eastern inspection tours (东巡) to pacify the former territories of Qi, Yan, and Chu in the east. Not to mention the empire conquered vast territories of non-Huaxia peoples such as the Baiyue, Baipu, Xiongnu, and Donghu; surrendered Xiongnu figures like Jin Midi (金日磾) could even hold high imperial office.

The Han nationality was still in the process of integration and formation during China's ***classical era***. The reason people are accustomed to tracing the foundation of the nation back to the Han Dynasty is largely because China never went through a complete ***feudal period*** (封建时代).

However, the Umayyad dynasty, which inherited the civil service systems of the conquered lands, heavily relied on Syrians; the subsequent Abbasid dynasty (阿拔斯王朝), having relocated its capital to Mesopotamia, heavily relied on Persians. **This obviously diverges light-years away from an Arab nation-state.**

If we consider the situation in the Arabian Peninsula post-conquest, it feels even more bizarre. After the Caliphate was established, the regions with the most frequent and fierce rebellions were not the newly conquered territories, but the Arabian Peninsula itself—Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, and even the Two Holy Cities (the Hejaz / 两圣地).

On the eve of the rise of the Wahhabi movement (瓦哈比运动) in the ***early modern period***, the Arabian Peninsula was still mired in a state of political chaos and backward production. Even idolatry, which was strictly and explicitly prohibited by Islam, actually ran rampant once again. It was practically indistinguishable from the era before the Prophet began his preaching.

Furthermore, some more direct evidence proves that a compromise likely indeed occurred. For example, Hasan ibn Ali (哈桑), the eldest son of Ali ibn Abi Talib (阿里), reached a compromise with Mu'awiya (穆阿维叶), relinquishing his claim to the Caliphate in exchange for an exceedingly lucrative annuity. Naturally, this had to be bankrolled by the tax revenues extracted from the conquered regions.

The rapid and massive fragmentation of Islamic sects makes this dynamic even more suspicious. Although the primary motive for the early Islamic schisms was over who had the right to succeed as Caliph and what succession system should be followed, *were there underlying economic interests driving these seemingly political motives?* For instance, were there certain factions of Arab Muslims who felt profoundly dissatisfied with the empire's policy of compromise toward the conquered?

Moreover, the contradictions regarding the successor practically provided a crucial motive for the emergence of this compromise.

When the Prophet Muhammad passed away, although he left behind the religious banner of Islam, the political institutional construction of the Islamic state had not yet been established in time—most notably, there was a glaring absence of systems and institutions regarding succession.

Consequently, one easily notices a stark reality: although the Prophet left behind a vigorous, formidable armed military group, it was not long before there were simply too many claimants to the Caliphate.

Whoever seized leadership had to confront a daunting dilemma: he needed to rely on his own capabilities to advance the Islamic conquests to satisfy the Arab Muslims' thirst for spoils of war, **yet he dared not push overly radical *feudalization* policies in the conquered territories.** This was because there were simply too many rivals coveting the throne. If a competitor postured a willingness to compromise with the ruling class of the conquered territories, the ruling Caliph would immediately find himself caught in a deadly crossfire from both within and without (内外夹击).

Therefore, choosing compromise appeared fundamentally necessary for the rulers' own survival.

In the beginning, the Arab conquerors not only refrained from expropriating the lands of the conquered, but did not even force any alteration to the local people's original faiths. The Arab Empire inherited the bureaucratic systems of Byzantium and Persia, utilizing these classical institutions to extract wealth from across the empire. A paramount purpose of this wealth was to **"co-opt" (**收买 **/ buy off)** the Arab warriors serving as the pillars of the conquest, as well as the rivals coveting the throne.

I noted that after the conquests, the aristocracy of the Two Holy Cities indeed became addicted to the dividends distributed by the empire. Not only did they trend toward extravagant decadence, but they also began losing their martial spirit in politics. From the mid-8th century onward, the vanguard of the Islamic conquests was no longer the Arabs, but gradually shifted to peoples like the Berbers (柏柏尔人) who converted to Islam after being conquered.

Therefore, although the martial prowess of the Islamic conquests was illustrious, it did not significantly propel the social progress of the Arabian Peninsula, **because the organic demand for national *feudalization* was suppressed.** It was not until a millennium later, when the entire Islamic

world faced the relentless encroachment of the West and mounting social crises, that this long-shelved demand resurfaced in the form of fundamentalism (原教旨主义).

In light of the above, I am inclined to conclude that the Arab nation basically possessed the conditions for ***feudalization*** at the onset of the conquests. It was only dictated by the circumstances of the times that the Muslim rulers, through compromise, adopted bureaucratizing measures (continuing the classical systems of ***the Middle East***), causing this feudal endeavor to be shelved for a prolonged period. *(Of course, the other side of this "compromise" was also based on the developmental conditions of Near Eastern society itself, which will be addressed in the next chapter).*

It was definitely not the case that they completely lacked the conditions for ***feudalization*** at the start of the conquest. It was only in the 10th and 11th centuries, when the impact of the Great Turkic Migrations (突厥大迁徙) became exceptionally prominent, that ***the Middle East*** pivoted toward comprehensive ***feudalization***.

Looking back from the perspective of later generations, the bureaucratization of the Arab Empire exerted a colossal impact on human history. The continuation of ***classical society*** in ***the Middle East*** meant that although Byzantium lost Egypt and the Levant (黎凡特), it did not face a two-front assault from feudalized regimes. Consequently, the remnants of this ***classical empire*** managed to survive much longer.

The bureaucratization of the Arab Empire actually placed a constraint on the expansion of Islam, **because there is a natural upper limit to the territorial expanse a *classical empire* can effectively control.** The establishment of the empire simultaneously marked the end of the first phase of Islamic conquests.

By the time the second phase of Islamic expansion commenced at the dawn of the second millennium AD, the dominance had already shifted into the hands of the newly converted, ***feudalized barbarians*** (封建化的蛮族). This marked the era of **feudal Islamic expansion**.

The most fascinating phenomenon forged by the classical Arab Empire lies in its developmental **"asynchrony" (**时差 **/ temporal lag)**. When Europe generally entered the ***Early Middle Ages***, the classical Islamic society of ***the Middle East*** functioned to preserve and transmit the achievements of Mediterranean classical civilization.

This is highly understandable. The high urbanization rates, developed commercial activities, and the openness, tolerance, and rationalism inherent to a **universal empire** certainly hold a special place in

human history. Naturally, these traits inevitably experience an ***ebb tide*** (退潮) during the early stages of ***feudalization***, which constitutes a loss for civilization.

However, because the Arab Empire prolonged ***the Middle East***'s exceedingly lengthy ***classical period***, the conquerors—being the relatively backward party—had to draw upon the achievements of the past Mediterranean classical civilizations to rule such a colossal state. Consequently, an inevitable outcome was that the Arab Empire possessed immense enthusiasm for translating, preserving, and expanding upon the civilizational fruits of the Greco-Roman era.

By the time the Islamic world generally entered the early stages of ***feudalization***, Europe had already advanced to the ***High Middle Ages***. The completion of societal reconfiguration equipped the Western world with the conditions to rediscover these classical civilizational achievements.

*(Of course, to my knowledge, when **medieval** Europe rediscovered the civilizational achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, they did not actually rely on translations from the Islamic world for primary sources; in reality, the Islamic world did not translate that many Greco-Roman works. What truly mattered was that the Islamic world made numerous innovations while studying and absorbing Mediterranean classical civilization, and these new discoveries proved highly valuable to the ascending Europeans).*

Thus, we can assert that the Islamic society's noble deed of transmitting and expanding upon classical civilizational achievements during the ***Middle Ages*** *(the **Middle Ages** as defined by Europeans)* was by no means born of the historical self-awareness of rulers or scholars, but was rather **the inevitable result of the evolution of social formations.**

This also perfectly explains why observers constantly perceive Islam as a tolerant, science-revering religion in its inception, only to become increasingly irrational, extreme, and narrow-minded later on.

This is not to say that the Turks and the subsequent Mongols destroyed a vast amount of social wealth and intellectual culture purely through martial force; rather, it is because ***feudalization*** **inherently unfolds this way during its initial stages.**

One can also recognize this through the internal mutations of Islam itself. As an Islamic philosopher during the zenith of the Great Turkic Migrations, Al-Ghazali's (安萨里) theories perfectly adapted to the overarching historical trend: **the *ebb tide of rationalism* during the early stage of *feudalization***, harmoniously integrating Sufi mysticism with orthodox theology.

The emergence of Sufi mysticism and the subsequent massive proliferation of **religious orders** (教团 / Sufi *Tariqas*) visually reflect this historical process even more directly. In the era of

feudalization, the general populace loathed convoluted theological debates and intricate paths to salvation; they yearned to attain salvation and spiritual elevation through simple, intuitive experiences.

This is obviously not a phenomenon exclusive to any single religion, but a highly universal one.

The transition from classical Japanese state Buddhism to **Chūsei** Buddhism (中世佛教) perfectly mirrors this. The belief that *"one can be reborn in the Pure Land simply by chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha"* (口念阿弥陀佛便可极乐往生) is the absolute quintessential popular religious consciousness of a ***feudal society*** (封建社会).

The development of Sufi **religious orders** functioned to maintain grassroots social organization. This, alongside the collapse of the Caliphate system, are fundamentally **two sides of the same coin** (一体两面) in the historical process of transitioning from a ***classical society*** to a ***feudal society***.

However, having said all that, the classical Arab Empire can hardly be deemed a "good thing" for either the Arab nation or for Islam itself.

Under circumstances where the conditions for ***feudalization*** were already sufficient, utilizing human agency to forcefully delay this historical process by two centuries undeniably constituted a devastating retardation of ***the Middle East***'s development.

When the Turkic peoples migrated westward in successive waves, the empire was washed away without possessing the slightest capacity for resistance. The arrival of the Mongols was delayed by merely two more centuries, yet it struck exactly during the most fragile historical phase of early ***feudalization***—after all, the fundamental organizational units of society were disintegrating down to their minimal components, while reconfiguration had not yet begun.

The repeated onslaughts of ***barbarians*** plunged the Islamic world of West Asia into severe stagnation during its ***feudal period***, which is clearly another kind of historical tragedy.

Imagine this: if the ***feudalization*** of ***the Middle East*** could have commenced two centuries earlier, would an ***early feudal state*** dominated by Arabs have had the opportunity to perform better against nomadic shocks?

Regardless, once the Islamic world stepped into ***feudal society***, it never managed to climb out of it on its own. Consequently, the Arab Empire's inheritance and expansion of classical civilizational achievements ultimately served as a stepping stone (为他人做嫁衣) for the West. The House of

Wisdom (智慧宫) was built using the wealth of the Arab Empire, the researchers within were scholars of the Arab Empire, yet the fruits of this House of Wisdom ultimately benefited Western Europeans.

(This is, of course, a hyperbolic expression. There were naturally many Islamic scholars outside the House of Wisdom who made outstanding contributions; simultaneously, Europeans' understanding of classical civilization fundamentally did not rely on the Islamic world).

This is not to say that without the Arabs transmitting and sublatating (传承和扬弃) the achievements of Greco-Roman civilization, Europe would not have risen to prosperity. These classical achievements are by no means an absolute necessity for modernizing into the ***early modern period***.

Japan is a perfect example: prior to the ***modern era*** (现代), the Japanese were arguably entirely ignorant of Greece and Rome, yet Japan smoothly transitioned into an ***early modern society*** (近代社会). This is ample proof that **what plays the decisive role in historical progression is social structure, not anything else.**

The Arabs' true contribution lay in accelerating Europe's progression from the ***Middle Ages*** into the ***early modern period***, which is undeniably impossible to overlook.

As a Chinese person—especially one intimately familiar with Chinese history—my profound resonance with the idiom **"Delay invites disaster"** (迟则生变) cuts to the absolute bone. During the critical periods of social revolution, one must absolutely muster the momentum to smash through all hardships in one vigorous, uninterrupted push (一鼓作气). The longer one drags it out, the easier it becomes to encounter catastrophic variables.

Of course, people today have no right to be overly harsh in accusing the Caliphs and conquerors of that era of being "too weak."

One must not forget that during the Great Islamic Conquests, neither the Eastern Roman Empire nor the Persian Empire was weak by any measure. Had it not been for the prolonged, grueling wars previously fought between these two empires, Islam's armed expansion would never have proceeded so smoothly.

More importantly, one should never forget that the Arab armies possessed absolutely no advantage over their enemies in terms of either manpower or equipment.

If the Muslim leaders had decided to adopt a far more radical ***feudalization*** route at that exact moment, the conquests would inevitably have become astronomically more difficult and uncertain than the history of our world dictates.

The Arab Empire swiftly took over the bureaucratic systems left behind by the ***Late-classical states*** (晚期古典国家) in the core regions of Middle Eastern civilization. In relatively peripheral regions, such as Tabaristan (塔布里斯坦), they demanded merely formal submission, completely respecting the original religious beliefs of the massive conquered populations. **These three points were indeed the absolute keys to the swift success of the Great Conquests.**

For the Arabs at that precise historical moment, the risks associated with immediate ***feudalization*** were simply far too colossal to bear.

3, The Unfavorable Factors Impeding Feudalization in the Islamic World

Under the shockwaves of the Great Turkic Migrations, Islamic society ultimately and inevitably marched toward ***feudalization*** (封建化). However, one can clearly observe that the ***Middle Ages*** of the Islamic world ultimately failed to evolve like the ***Middle Ages*** of Europe. ***Early modern society*** (近世社会) never crystallized within Islamic states; the people never reclaimed rationalism or humanism, but rather, fundamentalism intensified with terrifying ferocity.

Why did this happen?

I believe the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran serves as an excellent observation subject. If we trace history from the aftermath of the Mongol devastation of ***the Middle East***, it is easy to realize that the power of the "Twelvers" (十二伊玛目派 / *Twelver Shi'ism*) in the Iranian region steadily ballooned over time. They gradually hijacked the grassroots social organizations, ultimately steering Iran into a theocratic, church-state-integrated (政教合一) nation in the latter half of the last century.

The transformations experienced by Iran bear universal significance across the Islamic world.

Unlike China, shielded behind a massive plateau, or Europe, which itself is a colossal extended peninsula, the Islamic world—stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Roof of the World—is situated in an excessively "open" geographic position. The plains, river valleys, and intermontane basins suitable for serving as the foundational heartlands of mighty states are relentlessly severed by rolling mountain ranges and vast deserts. Furthermore, their individual scale is never large enough, and there simply does not exist a single geographic unit that possesses an overwhelming superiority in both economy and manpower.

For the **feudal** Islamic regimes of the ***Middle Ages***, dangerous ***barbarians*** were constantly marauding along their peripheries, yet the strength required to repel these incursions was perpetually too feeble. Within a vast expanse stretching tens of thousands of miles, teeming with countless nomadic tribes, the emergence of a few leaders possessing **Charismatic authority** (卡里斯玛式领袖) was by no means a low-probability event.

Furthermore, in the direction where the Islamic world faced the devastating incursions of formidable nomadic peoples from the ***Eurasian Steppe***—namely, ***Central Asia***—the actual geopolitical landscape was even more detrimental.

Unlike the northern plains of China or the plains of France and Hungary in Europe, ***Central Asia*** completely lacked contiguous, densely populated agricultural settlement zones (面状的定居区). Instead, its towns formed a **pointillist structure** (点状结构) with commercial cities functioning as the core nodes.

This grim physical reality inflicted three fatal difficulties upon the feudal Muslim regimes:

First, the distances between major settlements were exceedingly vast, and regional population density was low. This obviously maximized the mobility advantage of nomadic peoples whose military backbone consisted entirely of cavalry.

Second, although prior to the Industrial Revolution, the core economy of any region that had undergone the agricultural revolution was inevitably agriculture, in ***Central Asia***, trade networks were equally vital to local regimes. Therefore, a nomadic army did not even need to besiege a city to bring its enemies to their knees. It simply needed to launch relentless raids, driving trade costs so astronomically high that commercial routes were severed. The defending enemy would instantly find themselves in an utterly unsustainable predicament.

Finally, the agricultural situation of the entire region relied extremely heavily on highly complex **irrigation systems**. This sharply contrasts with regions enjoying relatively abundant precipitation, such as Europe and China.

If we observe the siege warfare during Japan's Sengoku period (战国时期), this point is effortlessly apparent. Under Japan's subtropical monsoon climate, the cost of rebuilding simple irrigation systems was incredibly low. Therefore, once a ***feudal lord*** was attacked by an enemy, he could always consider resorting to *Rōjō* (笼城战 / retreating into the castle and enduring a siege). The attacking force could indeed ravage the agricultural properties and infrastructure within the defender's territory. But the moment the attackers were forced to retreat due to logistical and

economic constraints *(e.g., their own territories also required cultivation)*, it was not difficult for the defender to restore agricultural production within their domain.

This is exactly why fortresses like Odawara Castle (小田原城) earned the prestigious reputation of being "impregnable" (难攻不落). Only a regime like Toyotomi Hideyoshi's, which had essentially unified Japan, possessed the capacity to utterly crush the opponent in a war of attrition.

But the situation in ***Central Asia*** is drastically different. When defenders are forced to retreat into their fortresses for defense, the attackers have absolute freedom to destroy the above-ground or underground irrigation canals in the surrounding countryside. Constructing them is arduous, but destroying them is terrifyingly easy.

Even if the attackers lift the siege and withdraw that year, it is impossible for the defenders to recover their strength in the short term. Therefore, when the attack comes again the following year, the defenders have already been fatally weakened. Furthermore, one could easily enumerate other factors detrimental to the defenders—for instance, the sheer lack of water constitutes a colossal threat to holding a city.

In conclusion, the physical realities of the Central Asian region made it exceedingly difficult for ***feudal lords*** to leverage the most prominent military advantage of a ***feudal system*** (封建制度)—namely, fighting a war of attrition through *Rōjō* (笼城作战 / enduring a siege).

Taking the Guanzhong region (关中地区) where I currently reside as a contrast makes this easy to understand. The Guanzhong region is densely populated, receives 600 millimeters of annual precipitation, and enjoys concurrent rain and heat (雨热同期). The ***commodity economy*** and wage labor relations of the entire region (in ancient times) were not developed in the slightest, not to mention how utterly negligible long-distance trade was as a proportion of the local economy.

Once a region like this undergoes ***feudalization***, it inevitably presents a landscape bristling with fortresses. For ***barbarian*** conquerors, this is an absolute nightmare. Because for them, manpower is excruciatingly precious; even if they managed to gnaw such fortresses down by brute force, all their teeth would be shattered in the process.

The Islamic world not only had to face the massive, perilous frontier of ***Central Asia***, but it never knew from which nearby mountain range *(e.g., Azerbaijan)* a few "tribal assassins" might suddenly emerge, sweeping across neighboring territories with overwhelming martial force.

Along the peripheries of already partially ***feudalized*** regions, there still existed vast numbers of un-***feudalized*** tribes. Once these backward peoples also developed the intrinsic need for ***feudalization***

and gained the upper hand in military force, they were bound to seize the land into their own hands to execute a ***feudalization*** dominated by their own tribe.

Therefore, to borrow a trendy term, **the Islamic society of the *Middle Ages* was exactly like the "*Chaotic Era*" (乱纪元) in the novel *The Three-Body Problem* (《三体》).** Just as the ***feudalization*** of a region reached a certain level of development, it was highly probable that conquerors emerging from nowhere would flip the board and force the entire process to start all over again.

The absolute greatest geopolitical advantage Europe possessed was its immunity to this stagnation. Because **all the devastating blows from the outer peripheries were absorbed by the Muslims.** The European heartland was rarely threatened by newly emerging ***feudalized barbarians*** (封建化的蛮族).

Throughout the entire ***Middle Ages***, the only ***barbarians*** worth mentioning in Europe were the Vikings from Scandinavia, but their threat was not even remotely comparable to the nomadic peoples of the Asian hinterland. When the Vikings launched a plundering raid, the absolute maximum was perhaps a little over a thousand men. Yet when nomadic tribes from the East closed in on ***the Middle East***, mobilizing an army of tens of thousands was perfectly normal—and they were cavalry, a significant portion of whom were highly trained and even clad in heavy armor.

When the Vikings began expanding southward, though they initially caused considerable turmoil, they could only settle in frontier regions like Sicily or Normandy, and they underwent ***feudalization*** in exceptionally short order.

Iran is the most prominent victim of this **"*Chaotic Era* (乱纪元)."**

The local political organizations of the state were progressively hollowed out amidst perennial turmoil. During nearly a century of internal and external wars following the disintegration of the Safavid Empire (萨菲王朝), they almost completely collapsed.

By the time of the Qajar Dynasty (恺加王朝), the religious power of the **"Twelvers"** had surged drastically relative to the monarch's power, securing a significant degree of independence from the secular dynasty. For example, in the judicial realm, the wealth—especially the landed estates—owned by the ***clerical stratum*** (教士阶层) expanded massively.

During this period, the hierarchical institutionalization of the Iranian Shiite clergy (什叶派教阶制度) grew increasingly perfected. The development of this religious apparatus—which closely resembled a bureaucratic hierarchy—in the 19th century fully proves, from the flip side, that **the grassroots governance of the Iranian state had completely failed, and religious power had simply stepped in to fill the vacuum.**

Under this trajectory of development, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 does not seem surprising in the slightest.

Back then, Islamic society was dragged into the ***feudal period*** (封建时代), dragging its feet and wholly reluctant, by the galloping nomads. Yet, it was subsequently trapped in prolonged stagnation by the endless waves of newly rising ***feudalized*** conquerors. One cannot help but call this an absolute social tragedy.

4, Islam Is a Religion Exceptionally Suited for Early Feudal Societies

On today's internet, Islam is frequently depicted as an intensely aggressive religion, sparking widespread apprehension. While this perspective indeed reflects a certain historical reality, it actively conceals another, vastly more crucial historical truth.

Is Islam's capacity for expansion formidable? Undoubtedly, yes. From Senegambia all the way to the East Indies, the fact that a single religion conquered such a vast swathe of territory over a millennium—even massively rolling back the spheres of influence of Christianity and Buddhism—would undeniably leave a profound impression on any observer.

However, on the flip side, we must acutely note that Islam's expansion possessed an extremely clear "boundary": **This religion was only ever capable of conquering societies in *pre-feudalized*** (前封建的) **regions; when faced with societies that had already undergone *feudalization*** (封建化)**, it was utterly powerless.**

If we meticulously catalogue the enemies Islam conquered, it is effortlessly apparent that they were essentially either untamed lands in the ***pre-state society*** (前国家社会), ***early slavery states*** (奴隶制的早期国家), or ***classical empires*** (古典帝国). Yet, when confronting truly ***feudalized*** enemies, let alone scoring victories, Islam was frequently and massively repelled.

First, let us observe the northeastern frontier of the Islamic map. While Muslims were conquering ***Central Asia***, the Xinjiang region of present-day China was still under the control of the Tang Empire—a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚帝国). The city-states of the Xinjiang region

were light-years away from ***feudalization***; hence, Islam conquered the region and massively infiltrated the Chinese interior during the Yuan Dynasty.

However, as the Mongols embraced Tibetan Buddhism and underwent preliminary ***feudalization***, by the 17th century, the Islamic forces in the Xinjiang region were actually overwhelmed by the Dzungar Khanate (准噶尔汗国), which practiced Tibetan Buddhism. Ironically, it was the Great Qing Emperor who ultimately lifted this mountainous burden off the heads of Xinjiang's Muslims. *(Even despite such retardation, the Islamization of northwestern China during the Ming and Qing dynasties was staggeringly severe).*

On the northern frontier of the Islamic map, the Islamic khanates in the central and western ***Eurasian Steppe*** were drastically beaten back to the Caucasus by the expansion of a ***feudalized*** Russia. The Islamic states that once stretched from the Southern Russian steppes to the shores of the Black Sea simply ceased to exist.

In Hindustan (印度斯坦), Islamic regimes did indeed come close to controlling the entire subcontinent. Yet, the current political map is extraordinarily fascinating.

The Indus River Valley, where Pakistan is located, shares a remarkably similar environment with the primary terrain of the Afro-Asian Islamic world. This tropical desert climate, predicated on large-river irrigation agriculture, is indeed exceedingly difficult to **feudalize**. When Turkic Muslims invaded, the region was indeed in a ***pre-feudalized*** state.

When the Ghurid dynasty (古尔王朝) first invaded what is now the territorial scope of Bangladesh, it was still considered the "frontier" of India—a watery expanse of swamps compared to the fully developed majority of the Ganges Basin. *(This phrasing might be slightly excessive, but the historical progression of the Bengal region—including both East and West Bengal—was indeed centuries behind the Ganges Plain, making its relative social backwardness entirely normal. I will mention this region again later).*

When Muslims first arrived in Kashmir (克什米尔), the Tibetan Empire (吐蕃帝国) ruling the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau had only recently collapsed. But as the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau underwent ***feudalization***, Islam could not advance half an inch further eastward onto the plateau.

The rulers of the Shah dynasty in Nepal, nestled at the southern foothills of the Himalayas, were originally Hindus from northern India who refused to submit to Islam. They clearly forged an ironclad defensive perimeter in this mountainous nation that was undergoing its ***feudal period***, and Muslims never set foot there.

When the Turks entered northern India, although the ***feudalization*** of northern India should have theoretically begun, its degree was extremely low, allowing Muslims to swiftly sweep across the region. But simultaneously, the feudal process in southern India was still vigorously underway, boasting a multitude of Hindu **feudal** kingdoms and even empires like Vijayanagara (毗奢耶那伽罗). Undoubtedly, when Muslim rulers cast their gaze southward, they discovered that conquering the region was harder than scaling the heavens. Neither the Delhi Sultanate nor the Mughal Emperors could ever completely crush the resistance at the southern tip of the subcontinent.

If one argues that the political independence of southern India from the north was primarily driven by geopolitical factors, then clearly, what drove such ferocious *religious* resistance must be their ***social being*** (社会存在).

Because one easily notes that regimes centered in northern India found it equally difficult to govern Bengal, yet this did not prevent Bangladesh from maintaining its identity as an Islamic nation even after independence.

Furthermore, as the feudal process in northern India developed further, Muslim rule in the north faced formidable challenges. The most classic example is the Sikhs (锡克教徒) in Punjab; the Muslims' holy war against them ended in catastrophic defeat. To this day, with northern and southern India unified under a single regime, it remains a regional power with Hinduism as its absolute core.

Further to the southeast, the situation was identical. The Maldives, Malaya, and the East Indies were populated by ***pre-state societies***, ***early slavery states***, and ***pseudo-classical empires*** (伪古典帝国) like Majapahit (满者伯夷). Without a shred of suspense, they were conquered by Islam. On the island of Java, Islamic expansion was even realized through localized Islamization sparking devastating rebellions.

However, in Sri Lanka, which practiced Theravada Buddhism (上座部佛教), as well as in the emerging **feudal nation-states** of Myanmar and Thailand on the Indochinese Peninsula (中南半岛) that converted under its influence, **the Muslims were effortlessly repelled by Buddhist *feudal lords*** (封建领主)**.** To this day, the Rohingya refugee crisis remains a lingering international issue.

In the north, the Islamic khanates stretching from the Southern Russian steppes to Siberia were swept completely clean by the Russians, who had already completed their ***feudalization***. The northern boundary of the Islamic world retreated to the Caucasus.

In Southeastern Europe, even though the Ottoman Turks once penetrated deep into Hungary, when the imperial tide finally receded, the only regions where Islam managed to secure a dominant position were places like Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina—nations dominated by mountainous terrain and teeming with scattered tribes.

However, in regions that had already formed **feudal nation-states** (封建民族国家) or exhibited obvious signs of ***feudalization*** at the time of the Turkish conquest *(in fact, one can easily note that the Balkans originally participated in the **feudalization** process brought about by the Eurasian Great Migrations, though it was less smooth than in Western Europe due to prolonged tug-of-war with the Byzantine Empire)*—such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and further out, Hungary—after achieving independence, their original religions remained completely intact. Conversely, under the prolonged rule of Byzantium—the remnant ***classical empire***—the vicinity of Constantinople and the Anatolian region obviously became the solid fundamental base for the Turks.

In the southwest, Ethiopia, which adhered to Oriental Orthodoxy, found itself completely encircled by Muslims by the 14th and 15th centuries. Not only did its coastal regions fall into Muslim hands, but the downstream Nubian region had also been in a disadvantaged position relative to Egypt's Islamic regimes ever since the Muslim conquest of Egypt, eventually allowing Muslims to secure present-day Sudan.

However, starting from the 13th century, Ethiopia embarked on its own ***feudalization*** process. This Christian enclave was not only not annihilated by enemies from all directions, but even launched highly effective counterattacks against the Muslims, remaining one of the most populous Christian nations to this day.

In regions rapidly conquered during the early Islamic period, such as Iberia and Sicily, the Muslims could not hold onto a single inch of ground. Sicily was snatched away by the ***feudalized*** Normans. The Christian states in northern Iberia ultimately spent over seven centuries completely expelling the Muslims *(the Reconquista)*. During this period, the only force capable of forming a stalemate with Christianity was none other than the Berbers, who were also undergoing their own feudal process. However, the Christian side obviously possessed a more advanced society and could secure massive external assistance, such as the Crusades, ultimately overwhelming their opponents.

In West Africa, Islam indeed achieved overwhelming dominance. But the society there was undoubtedly excessively backward; when Islam was introduced via the trans-Saharan trade routes, ***feudal societies*** fundamentally did not exist there. East Africa is exactly the same case.

Therefore, we can state with absolute clarity: **Islam is a religion capable of inflicting crushing, devastating blows upon *pre-feudalized* regions, but is utterly helpless against regions that have already been *feudalized*.** This has been corroborated by countless historical proofs.

Based on this fact, we can make a reverse deduction: **Islam is a religion exceedingly adapted to the demands of an *early feudal society*, yet it finds it exceedingly difficult to satisfy the demands raised by a society in the middle or late stages of *feudalization* transitioning toward the *early modern era*.**

Is there any other evidence to support this point? The answer is obviously yes.

Within the policies implemented by the Prophet himself during his lifetime—relying on the Quran to "establish laws" and reform the preexisting Arab society—we can find the exact evidence we are looking for. This is concentrated in the systems of **property inheritance** and **marriage**.

Muhammad first established the partial right of individuals to dispose of private property through a will system, negating the clan's ownership of property. Subsequently, he gradually abandoned the convention of distributing inheritance exclusively among paternal clansmen, affirming the inheritance rights of direct blood relatives, including women. The shares of inheritance for the deceased's close relatives in their individual capacities were fixed, and women were also taken into consideration.

Such a **partible inheritance** (析产制) system is undoubtedly one of the characteristics of an ***early feudal society*** (早期封建社会), because it reflects the miniaturization of production units *(and social units)*.

Regarding the marriage system, the Prophet fiercely condemned the previously loose unions between men and women and the non-exclusivity of partners, aiming to eradicate the "evil deeds" of "falling into adultery." *(I use quotation marks here obviously not to endorse the marriage system of pre-Islamic Arab society, but to state that marriage systems inevitably change with social development. Judging the justice of an institution from a different era using the moral lens of another is clearly irrational).*

Islam demanded the establishment of stable, monogamous households *(or strict patriarchal households)*. One of the most striking reforms was mandating an **"Iddah"** (待婚期 / waiting period) for women or widows before they could remarry, purely to determine if they were pregnant. This was obviously designed to indisputably verify the paternity of biological children, ultimately guaranteeing the legitimacy of property inheritance.

Synthesizing these two points, the conclusion practically jumps off the page.

Merely looking at **partible inheritance** regarding property, we can at most determine that this is a ***social consciousness*** suitable for a society following the disintegration of large, blood-tie-based extended families. That is to say, while ***early feudal societies*** indeed practiced partible inheritance,

this system of inheritance actually already formed during the ***classical period*** (古典时代). If we consider that the ***classical period*** is a transitional phase between a slavery class society and a **feudal** class society, it is not difficult to understand the inevitability of this situation, because a transitional period inevitably possesses characteristics of both its preceding and subsequent stages.

However, a marriage system taking a stable patriarchal family as its cornerstone and objective provides even more explicit proof that this is a ***social consciousness*** perfectly suited for early ***feudalization***.

If one notes the *Goseibai Shikimoku* (《御成败式目》/ *Formulary of Adjudications*) from the early Kamakura shogunate, they would undoubtedly have a profoundly deep appreciation of this point.

During Japan's dynastic period *(Heian period)*, an amorous, highly liberal sexual culture (好色文化) was exceedingly prevalent. Yet, the emerging samurai (*Buke*) regime had absolutely no desire to continue this ethos, **because stable family relationships are the unshakable bedrock of a *feudal system*** (封建制度）**.**

Although the amorous ethos of classical Japan was indeed quite prominent among ***classical states*** in human history, if we observe China and Rome, it is not difficult to discover that relatively open sexual relations were a universally existing phenomenon in ***classical societies***.

When *feudalization* commenced, social mores noticeably became vastly more conservative. This is exactly what the formation of the feudal ruling order demanded.

Therefore, the early words and deeds of the Prophet, centered around the Quran, serve as highly potent evidence proving that Islam is indeed a religion highly tailored to the exact demands of early ***feudalization***.

Not only that, but one can also find evidence in the actions of the ancients.

For instance, it is easy to notice that when Islam spread outward across an "open" world *(here, "open" refers to the geographical dimension)*, whenever the **"awaiting *feudalization*"** (待封建化 / *a term I use to designate subjects generating the need for* ***feudalization***) ***barbarians*** in the frontier regions of the Islamic world converted to Islam and established ***feudal states*** (封建国家), they frequently hoisted the fundamentalist banner of "purifying Islam and returning to the era of the Prophet."

Such events are extremely widely distributed across time and space. The earliest example is perhaps the Berbers of Morocco in the 11th century, who launched two monumental holy wars that contained the Christians in Iberia for over a century. A more recent example is the Islamic Jihad movements from the late 18th to the 19th century in the West African Sahel (萨赫勒带), spearheaded primarily by the Fulani people (富拉尼人). Its scope stretched from Senegambia eastward to the Lake Chad region, entirely transforming the political landscape of West Africa, and leaving terrifying remnants today, such as the terrorist organization Boko Haram.

We might as well ponder: *Why did these leaders of entirely different ethnicities, spanning such massive spatial and temporal distances, simultaneously choose the exact same fundamentalist slogan of "purifying Islam"?*

I believe the matter should be explained as follows: Although Islam's relatively strict doctrines might, in a certain sense, have dragged down Islamic society from further developing past its ***early feudal state***—for example, scholars often point to its **partible inheritance** (析产制)—it perfectly suited their initial needs. When a society advances to the ***High Middle Ages***, it is glaringly obvious that the *concentrated* inheritance of wealth (长子继承制 / primogeniture) is far more advantageous for the intergenerational transmission and expansion of capital, ultimately facilitating expanded societal investment in arts, sciences, and technology.

However, because Islamic society venerates the Quran as its absolute scripture, fundamentalists possess an innate moral high ground. This makes it exceedingly difficult to adapt the property inheritance system to changing times, which undeniably serves as a colossal roadblock to social development.

But this absolutely does not imply that Islam is monolithically immutable. If it were completely incapable of adapting to social changes, there is no logical reason it would not have been eliminated by society, rather than still boasting over two billion adherents distributed across such vast territories today.

We can easily cite examples of Islam adapting to the shifting tides of the times. For instance, **Mu'tazilism** (穆尔太齐赖派), which flourished during the Arab Empire—the continuation period of ***classical society*** (古典社会)—was an Islamic sect that upheld the doctrine of free will, massively absorbed ancient Greek philosophical thought, and leaned heavily toward rationalism. It elevated Islam from a simple faith into an unfathomably profound philosophy.

Today, we can easily point out that such ideology—emphasizing free will, logic, and rationality, and armed with complex philosophical frameworks—was indeed exceptionally suited for the

governance of a ***classical state***. This has been corroborated in the earlier histories of ***classical states***, and it is no wonder Caliph al-Ma'mun (哈里发马蒙) so heavily favored this sect.

However, as ***feudalization*** developed, such ideology was not only no longer needed for governance, but indeed fundamentally ceased to fit the social landscape. Consequently, starting from the latter half of the 9th century, this sect rapidly declined, ultimately leaving practically no significant influence.

If Mu'tazilism is the evidence on the Muslim timeline corresponding to the ***classical period***, then Al-Ghazali's efforts to fuse Sufism with orthodox theology are clearly potent evidence for the ***Chūsei*** (中世 / feudal ***Middle Ages***) period.

If we observe the ***modern and contemporary eras*** (现当代), the evidence is equally abundant. The most typical example *(which I am also relatively familiar with)* is none other than Iran, which gradually slid into a theocracy. During the chaotic centuries of warfare and the 18th/19th-century Qajar rule, the clerics of the **"Twelvers"** significantly adjusted their original doctrines in order to prepare to physically take over the state apparatus.

The most representative event of this was the total victory of **Usulism** (乌苏尔派). The Usulis fiercely championed the right of a **Mujtahid** (穆智台希德 / an authoritative expounder of Islamic law) to exercise **Ijtihad** (伊智提哈德 / independent reasoning or the creation of legal interpretation). They argued that *every* generation required a *living* authority on legal interpretation *(which, naturally, meant high-ranking Shiite clerics like Khomeini)* to interpret ***religious law*** (宗教教法) and develop its practical applications.

Those relatively familiar with the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran can visibly see today's Grand Ayatollahs exercising precisely such astronomical power; at times, looking at it from the perspective of an outsider, it even feels bizarre. For example, during significant moments *(like military parades)*, Iranians will display massive portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei. Although everyone knows this custom was pilfered from the so-called communist revolutions of the last century, and Iranian officials will naturally claim these portraits are not displayed for the purpose of "worship," the fact that this occurs in a theocratic state whose state religion—Islam—explicitly and strictly prohibits idolatry, is somewhat darkly comical.

However, we can indeed effortlessly understand why the Usuli sect emerged victorious: **Because the grassroots power of Iran had collapsed at the time, and the only force capable of filling that power vacuum was inevitably the *clerical stratum*.** Therefore, changes in ***religious doctrine***

had to occur to fling the doors wide open for the "Twelver" clerics to plunge deeply into direct political rule.

Therefore, we can assert that although Islam possesses inherently conservative characteristics, it obviously wields no immutable, eternal divine power; it is fundamentally impossible for society to change while ***religious doctrines*** remain unaltered by a single word.

Understanding this, if we place ourselves in the shoes of those Islamic rulers who needed to spearhead the ***feudalization*** process of their own nations, how would they view the current situation?

The landscape they observed must have been this: The development of Islam in different regions inevitably led to changes in doctrines and religious organizations. Because in regions that had already been ***feudalized***, no matter how sluggish the pace, some degree of progress would ultimately occur; the local Islam there might have already diverged from the Islam that served the *early* stages of ***feudalization***.

These newly emerging rulers would likely lament: *"Islam is indeed excellent, but the 'current' Islam is too advanced for my people. Returning to the era of the Prophet is the absolute best option."*

Consequently, newly converted regimes possessing an intense need for ***feudalization*** inevitably pursued fundamentalist Islam to achieve conquest and rule. In this process, they formed enmities with pagans and heretics, further stimulating the zealotry of holy wars (Jihad).

However, an unfortunate tragedy we can observe is that the geographical position of the Islamic world is excessively open. Along its sprawling peripheries, newly emerging nations undergoing ***feudalization*** continuously joined the great Muslim ***community***. Even within the internal mountainous regions of the Islamic world, a few tribes could suddenly emerge and launch a **"feudal conquest."**

Although this unbroken chain of political movements spanning ten centuries massively expanded Islam's dominions—forging the world's second-largest (and potentially the future largest) global religion—on the flip side, the fundamentalist demands of these newly emerging nations, both inside and outside the Islamic society, **significantly retarded the progressive evolution of Islam itself alongside the shifting times.**

Two factors further amplified this negative impact: First, Islam demands taking the Quran as the ultimate guide, which grants fundamentalists a natural, innate moral superiority within Islamic society. Second, Islam mandates that every Muslim, if conditions permit, must undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca (the *Hajj* / 麦加朝覲) at least once. This measure, originally designed to solidify the cohesion of believers, later mutated into a massive catalyst for the proliferation of fundamentalism.

Because Muslims from societies at vastly different stages of development all converged in Mecca, the voices of fundamentalists were drastically amplified. If we observe the modern history of Islam (the 18th and 19th centuries), this phenomenon is absolutely impossible to ignore.

Thus, we now have ample reason to prove that **Islam is indeed a religion exceptionally suited for societies in the early stages of *feudalization*, yet inherently maladapted to the further development of the *feudalization* process.**

Simultaneously, we have pinpointed the root causes behind the generation of holy wars, as well as the societal roots explaining why the Islamic world devolved into backwardness *(though, inevitably, there are naturally other contributing factors)*.

Moreover, I believe the attempt made in this section—**reinterpreting the propagative capacity of a religion as its adaptive capacity for social organization**—will prove immensely beneficial for all subsequent research.

5, The Geographical Openness of the Islamic World Was Detrimental to Its Development

Ironically and rather dramatically, although the Islamic world's frequent interactions with neighboring ethnic groups exerted a definite negative impact on the development of Islamic society, the "responses" to this expansion serve as absolutely excellent subjects for researching how societies at different developmental stages react when confronted with the exact same ideology *(especially the ideology of the **feudal period** /封建时期)*.

This is because, prior to the Age of Discovery, Christian Europe was situated relatively on the periphery of the world and did not face the immensely complex and volatile external conditions that the Islamic world endured. By the time Europeans began reversing the global paradigm through the Age of Discovery and expanding toward every corner of the globe, their overwhelming military superiority had already become glaringly obvious, and they had long since departed from the phase of a typical ***feudal society*** (封建社会). *(This implies that Christianity itself was no longer a typical **feudal religion** /封建宗教).*

This dynamic bears a striking resemblance to the history of China. In my view, although the historical trajectory of our country can thoroughly be characterized as a rare, monumental tragedy, it is precisely these narratives of societies marching toward failure—like the Chinese and Islamic societies—that can effectively explain why the West and Japan ultimately succeeded.

Just as I observed when analyzing Japan's learning from China during the Asuka and Nara periods: when a society is confronted with a myriad of foreign imports—including artifacts, ideology, culture, and institutions—what it ultimately manages to absorb and integrate into its own entity will **inevitably be the contents that align with its current stage of social development.**

I previously pointed out that Islam possessed an overwhelming superiority over ***pre-feudal societies*** (前封建社会). However, it was equally impossible for the Islam that conquered these **pre-feudal** regions not to be profoundly influenced by the local conditions.

Africa, being the cradle of humanity and the continent with the most staggering diversity, witnessed various distinct models of Islamic expansion. When ***pre-state societies*** (前国家社会) and ***early slavery societies*** (奴隶制早期国家)—represented by East and Central Africa—adopted Islam, they retained a massive volume of clan-society vestiges. This included practices like idolatry and matrilineal inheritance, customs that Islam conspicuously and explicitly repudiates.

This occurred simply because these societies were even more backward than the Arab society during the Prophet's lifetime; they fundamentally had not yet reached the social stage where blood-tie clans begin to disintegrate. Consequently, some appalling primitive customs, such as female genital mutilation (割礼), actually reverse-infiltrated and proliferated within Islam. As to the exact reasons behind this, the reader can naturally deduce.

In the bend of the Niger River in West Africa, the trans-Saharan trade brought astonishing wealth, advanced knowledge, and throngs of visitors from distant lands. Stimulated by external forces starting from the 13th century, this region was able to form massive empires with ***classical characteristics*** (古典特征), such as the Mali Empire, relatively early. *(Here, "early" is relative to the actual developmental conditions of the local society, not compared to other global regions).*

The rulers of Mali converted to Islam driven by both external diplomatic interests and internal ruling imperatives. This is a classic textbook example of a ***classical state*** (古典国家) utilizing Islam as a state religion. One can distinctly observe the characteristics of Islam functioning as a state religion in West Africa back then. For instance, the imperial rulers relied on the mosques in Timbuktu to construct the University of Sankore, the scale and academic caliber of which were sufficient to leave a profound impression on travelers from across the globe. A relaxed social atmosphere and academic prosperity are the absolute hallmarks of a ***classical society*** (古典社会).

Furthermore, one can notice that straight through the reign of the Songhai Empire (桑海帝国), those who truly practiced Islam remained the imperial royal family and the high aristocracy. The influence of Islam was strictly confined to major cities; it had not spread broadly across the vast rural and pastoral areas.

I note that some scholars have already pointed out that between the 10th and 12th centuries, the Black monarchs and ruling elites across the entire Sahel basically converted to Islam *(provided, of course, that their societies had already entered a state formation; as for the tribes, their beliefs*

remained highly diverse). However, the true popularization of Islam at the grassroots level of society was ultimately achieved through the Jihad movements that erupted around 1800.

It is believed that the same holds true within the present-day Republic of Sudan. For a prolonged period, the Funj Sultanate (芬吉苏丹国) was essentially nothing more than an indigenous African regime draped in an Islamic cloak. It was not until the precipice of its collapse that Islamic law finally penetrated deeply into society.

Following the disintegration of the Songhai Empire, the trans-Saharan trade subsequently plunged into decline. By this time, the socio-economic conditions necessary to sustain a ***classical state*** had already vanished, leaving the magnificent mosques and universities desolate.

However, with the deepening activities of Sufi **religious orders** (教团) in West Africa and the gradual maturation of the conditions for ***feudalization*** (封建化) in the Sahel region, two centuries later in the 18th century, Islam experienced a second wave of propagation locally.

This wave of propagation was undoubtedly accomplished through multiple holy wars spearheaded by the Fulani people, spanning 3,500 kilometers from the Atlantic Ocean to Central Africa. Islam was thus able to firmly take root across the entire Sahel region.

The radical, xenophobic, and fundamentalist Islam was merely the surface phenomenon; what lay behind it was the pragmatic necessity of the Fulani nation, acting as a **feudal ruling class**, to conquer and govern vast territories.

Therefore, one can see with absolute clarity: **Islam was always able to effortlessly conquer regions more backward than itself** *(this is because, as we previously established, Islam is a religion suited for **early feudal societies**, hence anything "more backward" constitutes a **pre-feudal society**)*, **but when facing regions that had already been feudalized, it was utterly powerless.** Even brief occupations would ultimately be repelled.

*(Even if Islam was introduced or even won the conversion of rulers while a society was still in a pre-feudal stage, realizing a Sharia-compliant Islamic social formation still strictly required the emergence of **feudal characteristics** within that region).*

Naturally, people cannot overly criticize the latter point, because the backward conquering the advanced is inherently a relatively rare occurrence.

However, the former characteristic is simply far too glaring. **This resulted in Islam finding it exceedingly difficult to accept the ideologies and cultures of advanced regions, yet frequently falling victim to the corrosive influence of regions more backward than itself.**

The expansion of Islam might indeed be a breathtaking enterprise of conquest. But for the ordinary Muslim commoners who practice the faith, did they ultimately benefit from this expansion, or, looking at the long arc of history, did they actually fall victim to it?

6, The Fulani Jihads in the West African Sahel

I would like to further discuss the Fulani Jihads in West Africa. Although I believe this monumental historical event essentially remains a case of a **"awaiting *feudalization*"** backward people utilizing Islam to undergo ***feudalization***, because it occurred at such a late era, Western influence had already conspicuously emerged along the entire African coastline. Therefore, alongside internal factors, the genesis of the Fulani Jihads was obviously driven by significant external factors.

For example, I noticed that one of the fundamental political demands raised by the Jihad's initiator, Usman dan Fodio (丹-福迪奥), was tax relief and the strict prohibition of enslaving Muslims. Why was this the case?

When Europeans arrived in Africa, slaves became the most coveted commodity on the continent. The indigenous states along the Guinea coast imported European weapons and manufactured goods, and in turn, sold slaves acquired through warfare and slave-raiding back to the Europeans. This constituted one leg of the infamous Triangular Trade.

As the coastal Black nations gradually grew powerful through their interactions with Europe, they cast their gaze toward the relatively backward inland Africa, utilizing martial force to harvest slaves there. Thus, even the inland regions were violently dragged into the international slave trade.

At that time, inland Africa was fractured into a multitude of small states; their intrinsic power was weak, and they were incapable of forming alliances. Consequently, coastal indigenous states, and subsequently European powers, could acquire slaves from the African interior at staggeringly low costs. Even if we set aside the extreme backwardness and inhumanity of slavery and merely view slaves as a "commodity," we can say that the entire inland Africa was trapped in a supra-economic disadvantageous position within international trade, simply because this commodity was far too cheap.

If a formidable regime could unify the inland region—just as the later Sokoto Caliphate (索科托哈里发国) did by annexing dozens of West African native states as its vassals—then this regime would effectively monopolize the commodity of slaves, genuinely elevating its bargaining power (议价权) in the international market.

Such demands indeed summoned the ambitious warlords of the inland regions to make their attempts, and Islam, functioning as an ideological and organizational weapon, undeniably proved immensely helpful.

The regions where the Jihads originated were not areas in direct contact with the West at the time; they were **"secondary contact zones"** (次级接触地带), meaning they could only interact via the regions of direct contact. The Western powers often underestimated the impact of these Jihads when they erupted, and geographical distance weakened their willingness and capacity to intervene. Thus, these secondary contact zones indeed found the opportunity to form a unified, massive state.

However, although such a regime makes a plethora of glittering promises when seizing the realm—and indeed, a small fraction of "revolutionary heroes" believe in these idealistic slogans until their dying breath—**the reality is inevitably that the state swiftly devolves into the very entity it once opposed.** It utilizes its monopoly over a specific international commodity to consolidate its rule.

Therefore, we can observe that although the Fulani Jihads indeed proclaimed the vision of opposing slavery at their inception, the reality is that the state rapidly mutated into a colossal slave-holding empire. By 1850, the Sokoto Caliphate was the second-largest slave-holding region in the entire world, trailing only the American South.

(Of course, this is merely speaking formally, as the definition of a "slave" varies wildly across the globe. If you ask me, by 1850, the absolute largest slave-holding region in the world was undeniably China. The second was likely India, whose total population was second only to China's, even though the British had already officially abolished slavery in India in 1843).

After the American Civil War, Sokoto leaped to first place. Possessing a Muslim identity fundamentally could not prevent impoverished commoners from being reduced to slaves.

A **"Fulani-style state"** (富拉尼式国家) formed in this manner can never deliver true national liberation; it merely centralizes previously scattered exploitation. The region's disadvantageous position within the international division of labor remains utterly unchanged. Its ruler is not so much the leader of a nation as the chief overseer of a **"sweatshop"** (血汗工厂).

Maintaining the current system allows the state to become powerful in the short term. Setting everything else aside, the surge in fiscal revenue is sufficient to enable a Fulani-style state to build an armed force with a **"façade of modernization"** (表面现代化), invest in infrastructure, and partially ameliorate people's livelihoods. However, this simultaneously forges a massive vested interest group and exacerbates path dependency. Not to mention, since the very foundation of the state relied on the assistance of a radical ideology, the rulers must constantly contrive ways to prove its superiority and cannot possibly abandon their founding ethos immediately. Consequently, the

greater the initial achievements the state secures, the exponentially harder it becomes to genuinely modernize. Since such a state struggles to generate true technological progress, and its society remains light-years away from a ***modern society***, the moment the rulers face a crisis, their only recourse is to intensify the exploitation of their own people, which conversely **exacerbates the social crisis**.

To be honest, writing up to this point, it is practically impossible for any reader familiar with the modern history of ***East Asia*** not to experience a profound sense of déjà vu. When we look at the historical river of the 20th century and observe a certain colossal nation—having endured violent social upheavals—similarly utilizing a radical ideology to achieve an extreme concentration of power; when it leverages its massive population scale and the extreme extraction termed the "**demographic dividend**" (人口红利) to conjure a miracle of "**rejuvenation**" (复兴) in the short term that shocks outsiders, it is not difficult to realize what the true underlying color of this so-called "historical leap" actually is. The ultra-economic extraction it conducts is even more efficient and ruthless than that of the old eras it overthrew. History has proven time and again that any regime forcibly ripened by relying on this model will ultimately exhaust the true underlying substance of its society, making it difficult to possess a future leading to tomorrow.

Finally, some might harbor doubts: *Since the Sokoto Caliphate later devolved into a massive slave-holding region, is it still rational to categorize the Fulani Jihads as an Islamic social movement of early* ***feudalization****?*

My answer is: **It remains entirely rational.** First, we have already pointed out that the ***feudalization*** of the Sahel occurred far too late. European influence had inevitably emerged, and the existence of such a massive slave population in the Caliphate was directly dictated by these external factors. Second, the commencement of an endeavor does not guarantee it will culminate in a perfect ending. It is not as if China never commenced ***feudalization***—but look at where it is now. Third, whether judging from the Fulani rulers utilizing Islam to wage holy wars back then, or the current reality where the Fulani people are widely distributed across West Africa, maintaining economic dominance over other local ethnic groups, and forcing cohabiting ethnic groups to become "Fulanized" (富拉尼化)—the process of ***feudalization*** obviously occurred to a certain extent.

As for further evidence, it awaits supplementation by others; after all, attempting to comprehend the history and reality of West African society from within China is indeed exceptionally difficult.

7, The New Criterion I Have Adopted

My superficial research into the history of Islam concludes here. What satisfies me the most is that the entire developmental trajectory of Islam can still be perfectly encapsulated and explained within my theoretical framework, thoroughly discarding the myriad previous explanations that attributed the religion's characteristics merely to "tolerance" or "narrow-mindedness."

We now know that Islam's various manifestations across different nations and different eras were, in the final analysis, neither because Allah genuinely possessed some supreme divine power, nor because rulers possessed incomparable personal will. **Rather, they were strictly determined by the specific social stage the local region was situated in.**

A religion created by humans can ultimately never breach the natural laws governing human development. This manifests the absolute grandeur of science, while still affirming the historical significance of religion.

Beyond this, while pondering the history of Islam, because I was confronted with the predicament of information scarcity, I also attempted to actively reform my research methodology in practice. For instance, when I previously argued the thesis that Islam is a religion exceedingly suited for the early stage of ***feudalization*** (封建化), but fundamentally maladapted to the **mid-feudalization stage** (封建化中期) and the transition to the ***early modern era*** (近代), I adopted the **"Tri-phase Consistency" (**三相一致**)** principle.

The "three phases" mentioned here refer to three distinct manifestations, their importance increasing sequentially: **Phase One:** What the people of that era *said* and *thought*. **Phase Two:** What the people of that era *did*. **Phase Three:** How the society of that era *reacted*.

What I term "social reaction" refers to: in that specific era, whose speech was validated and whose was repudiated? Whose ideology expanded and whose perished? Whose enterprise succeeded and whose ultimately failed? **"Social reaction" is the holistic response made by society toward the first two phases.**

The reason I maintain that the confidence level (置信度) of these three manifestations increases sequentially is because people can easily speak falsehoods, but their *actions* will inevitably be based on their judgments of their own interests *(and the "interests" mentioned here inherently include value orientations)*. Furthermore, "thought" has no choice but to be subsumed under "speech," because the reality is that no one can drill into another person's head to physically observe what they are truly thinking. If we want to comprehend another person's thoughts, they must express them—and the very act of expression introduces the possibility of fabrication.

The reason I deem the "social reaction" to be of the supreme utmost importance is because **no single individual, nor any group composed of a tiny minority, can possibly defy *social being* (**社会存在**).** Therefore, the manifestation of the societal whole possesses the absolute highest credibility.

If all three phases simultaneously point toward a single conclusion, then we can state with absolute certainty that this conclusion must be correct. If Phase Three and one other phase point toward a

conclusion, while the remaining phase points in the opposite direction, we can still say that this conclusion has an overwhelmingly high probability of being correct; it is highly likely that the recorded documentation is flawed.

If the "social reaction" runs completely contrary to the directions pointed to by the first two phases, then one must still take the social reaction as the ultimate standard. Because human judgment inevitably carries the possibility of error, whereas the macro-evolution of the societal whole is inevitably predicated upon its current mode of existence.

In doing so, I have at least attempted to establish a relatively clear judgment mechanism. This is a matter of sheer necessity. While reading, I discovered far too many instances of "shooting the arrow first and painting the bullseye later" (先射箭再立靶子). In eras where historical data is as vast as the ocean, people can almost *always* cherry-pick fragments from the archives to support their own arguments. If discussions proceed this way, they will literally never end, and the correct answers might be buried forever.

Naturally, people will inevitably criticize me. After all, passing an accurate judgment on "social manifestation" is no easy feat. If one merely observes isolated social phenomena, misjudgments are not uncommon; elevating it above textual documentation might seem somewhat dangerous.

But what I want to say is this: **Everyone must adapt to the specific environment they inhabit, and my motherland is precisely such a terrifying environment.**

Although the official establishment has always flaunted China's (basically) uninterrupted Official Histories (正史文献) as a matter of immense pride, any clear-headed individual should understand: **Excessively hyping and obsessing over state-sponsored historiography is, in and of itself, a glaring symptom of a regime's severe deficit in political legitimacy.**

This is absolutely no secret. Even if we set China aside, one can easily observe the Republic of Venice. Beginning in the 16th century, Venice plunged into rapid decline. Yet it was precisely in that very 16th century that the Venetian state officially and vigorously developed historical writing, forging the "Golden Age" of Venetian historiography and the "Myth of Venice" that circulated to later generations. The reasons for this are self-evident.

If one is intimately familiar with the history of the Chinese Empire over the last millennium, one can easily comprehend just how appallingly abysmal the quality of official historiography from this period truly is. Regarding monumental historical events—such as the "Shadows of Candles and Sounds of Axes" (斧声烛影), the twelve golden medallions recalling Yue Fei (十二道金牌召回岳飞), or the Tumu Crisis (土木堡之变)—the official texts are either deeply secretive and evasive, or riddled with blatant self-contradictions everywhere. Their credibility is pitifully low.

Even domestic scholars in China conducting relevant research are forced to rely heavily on privately authored "unofficial histories" (野史) from the grassroots. Practically no one would be foolish enough to believe that the Official Histories are recounting historical facts; they are nothing more than the dynasty's imperially sanctioned fairy tales (钦定故事).

The reason I must emphasize "Tri-phase Consistency" and elevate "social reaction" to the highest echelon is inherently a forced adaptation I had to make against the exceedingly hostile informational environment I inhabit. Others might not find themselves in my environment, and thus there is naturally no need for them to unthinkingly endorse the methodologies I have adopted.

8, Why Observe Byzantium and the Necessity of Considering Commercial Factors

Why do I append a section narrating the history of Byzantium? There are four reasons.

First, ***the Near East*** (近东) *(I use this term here primarily out of respect for the subject of this narrative, Byzantium)*, as the cradle of human civilization, served as the epicenter of human civilization for fully 70% of human history. Byzantium was a state that ruled this region for a prolonged period and exerted a monumental impact; therefore, I deem it absolutely necessary to narrate its history.

Second, I have previously indicated that Byzantium, as the remnant of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国), still retained the bureaucratic system of the ***classical period*** *(though inevitably with some mutations)* during an era when its peripheries had already been universally ***feudalized*** (封建化的). Ultimately, this ancient relic was unexceptionally eliminated by history due to the obsolescence of its social system. Readers will naturally wonder: *Are there any similarities between the continuous bureaucratic system of the Byzantine Empire and the* ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制) *established and consolidated in China during the period of Byzantine revival? And are there any clearly distinguishable differences?* I believe I need to answer these two questions.

Third, by narrating the historical issues of Byzantium, I am laying the groundwork in advance for the writing of the next chapter, introducing a corrective factor that has not been emphasized previously: **commercial and trade networks.**

Fourth, although I personally obviously cannot harbor much affection for Byzantium—because I am acutely aware that if a ***classical state*** like Byzantium never perished, or if, for some reason, it conquered vast territories like the ***restoration-bureaucratic*** China, it would only bring unprecedented disaster. Considering its geographical proximity to Europe, the overarching situation of human civilization would have become exceedingly grim.

However, I must also admit that the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 is absolutely one of the most unforgettable moments in history; this is a consensus even within China. In the final dozens of days of the siege, the monarch and the people of this city, the militia and the reinforcements, and even the Turks outside the walls collectively forged what Stefan Zweig would call a **"stellar moment of humanity"** (人类群星闪耀的时刻), remembered by the world for over 500 years.

For a Chinese person like myself, who intimately understands the destiny of his own country, such a spectacle obviously possesses an **"apocalyptic"** (启示录) significance. It constantly reminds us that even the greatest of nations cannot escape the day of its demise.

What moves me about Byzantium is that, even though it similarly embarked on a "deviant path" *(of course, we will subsequently see that Byzantium's trajectory was obviously far from a true deviant path; it at least conformed to the principles revealed by sociology)*, and even though its actions were certainly not devoid of despicable aspects in the past, **the brilliance of its final moment at least granted the entire nation a decent and dignified end.**

Yet, I believe that even such a dignified exit is something utterly impossible for China to pursue. This inevitably makes my personal attitude toward Byzantium extremely complex, and thus I am willing to expend ink on it here. *(Aside from this chapter, there are a few remaining commentaries regarding Byzantium's **feudalization** process in Chapter XII, Section 23).*

Although I intend to explicitly lay out my theory on historical periodization in the next chapter, readers who have followed along from the beginning likely already have a solid grasp of my perspectives. An astute reader will inevitably raise the following question:

If the ***classical period*** is viewed as the transition between a ***slavery society*** *(readers, please do not forget that under the Chinese context, I have no better alternative but to use this term)* and a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), then there is absolutely no rational justification for ***the Near East*** to have experienced such an exceedingly protracted ***classical society***.

Suppose we view the **Achaemenid Empire** (阿契美尼德王朝), which rose in the 6th century BC, as the first great ***classical empire*** *(it undeniably already possessed the characteristics of a **classical empire**)*, and view Byzantium as its continuous classical successor. In that case, regions like **Anatolia** (安纳托利亚) experienced a ***classical period*** stretching for an astonishing 15 centuries. And across the entire **Fertile Crescent** (新月沃土), the ***classical period*** exceeded a millennium.

This defies all logic.

Solely to resolve this glaring chronological anomaly, a monumental corrective factor must be introduced. I believe this corrective factor is **commercial and trade networks**.

I have long noticed that there indeed exist certain regimes built upon a ***social being*** (社会存在) ostensibly more backward than the ***classical period***, yet they exhibited a substantial array of ***classical characteristics*** (古典特征)—such as vast territorial expanse, formidable monarchical power, prosperous urban centers, a developed ***commodity economy***, ideological openness, and academic flourishing.

First, this is because highly developed international trade created massive volumes of circulation. The influx of advanced technology and culture from afar enabled the regions along these trade routes to accumulate staggering wealth. Consequently, relatively backward regions situated within the trade network had the opportunity to rapidly elevate their civilizational level, granting them the capacity to sustain a ***stratum*** of non-productive members of society (脱产的社会成员).

Second, although agriculture is undeniably the indisputable bedrock for all pre-industrial large states, for the ruling class of the state, *commerce* is exceptionally crucial. The reason is incredibly simple: For a state with vast territorial expanses—even a state with a bureaucratic system as highly developed as China's—it is exceedingly difficult for the monarch to accurately grasp the situation in regions distant from the capital. Because no matter what, the administrative capacity of a state can never exceed the absolute limit sustainable by its socio-economic baseline.

In eras where monetary circulation was insufficiently developed, many states still had to collect taxes in kind, primarily grain. The mere fact that grain could rot was highly detrimental to a massive state.

Commerce, however, is entirely different. Trade—especially the highly lucrative international luxury trade—inevitably concentrated in a minority of commercial cities boasting superior geographical locations. To minimize costs, the primary participants in this trade inevitably chose to reside concentrically. **This perfectly facilitated management and taxation by the central government.**

Therefore, international trade could drastically alter the balance of power between the center and the localities. Even though the central government lacked the capacity to pervasively control the boundless rural expanse, maintaining concentrated control over a few major cities was never a problem. In this manner, the power of the central government, headed by the monarch, was massively amplified.

Finally, if a state's economy is highly dependent on trade, this could introduce **merchants and the burgher class (**市民阶层**)** capable of playing a pivotal role in politics.

Originally, when conceptualizing the ***classical period***, we merely emphasized the process of transitioning ruling power between **slave-owning aristocrats** (奴隶主贵族) and ***feudal landlords*** (封建领主). But once merchants and burghers also enter politics as a substantial force, they are entirely capable of counterbalancing one side while the other is practically inactive. This implies that a ***classical state*** can absolutely emerge earlier than the transitional period (早产), just as it can continue to survive for a period after the transitional period has concluded (延寿).

Proceeding this way indeed yields numerous benefits for conceptualizing historical issues. For example, we can now explicitly differentiate Byzantium from China, even though the bureaucratic systems of both nations persisted for an incredibly long time during the era of ***feudalization*** (封建化).

However, what we simultaneously cannot ignore is that once we loosen the definitional constraints of ***classical states*** and ***classical societies***, a new problem emerges: *Just how "premature" can a massive state be while still qualifying as a* ***classical state****?* How do we accurately differentiate between a prematurely matured ***classical state*** and a slavery state that merely became exceptionally bloated due to commercial interests? How do we accurately judge whether trade was the primary influence, or if a leader possessing **Charismatic authority** (卡里斯玛式领袖) simply played the core role?

Questions like these are only easy to answer in pure theory. After all, one can effortlessly toss out tautological assertions: *Only a regime that has undergone a qualitative change can be deemed a premature* ***classical state****; those with mere quantitative changes are simply bloated early (slavery) states.*

But regarding the exact threshold that constitutes a "qualitative change," obviously, different people are highly unlikely to share a unanimous consensus. One could clearly stipulate that a regime possessing certain characteristics simultaneously *(creating a massive checklist encompassing every conceivable trait of a* ***classical empire****)* is definitively a ***classical state***, and declare that those completely lacking these traits are definitely not. Yet, establishing a universally accepted classification for states possessing only *some* of these traits remains fundamentally elusive.

Therefore, my stance is this: Although commercial trade is indeed a necessary corrective factor, unless we are absolutely forced to introduce it for explanation, we should not treat it as a primary cause.

I state this with another consideration in mind: **While commercial and trade factors can indeed stretch *classical society* in both directions along the timeline, this is fundamentally insufficient to alter the essential historical position of the *classical period*.**

For regions that prematurely rushed into ***classical society***, lingering too long in the ***classical period*** failed to bring sustained, substantial social progress to the local area. Instead, as demonstrated by Persia, they sank into a sort of stagnation, ultimately turning into the relatively backward party.

For regions that perpetuated ***classical society*** into the era of ***feudalization***, an ancient empire standing out like a crane among a flock of fragmented feudal regimes (鹤立鸡群的老大帝国) still **fundamentally could not bypass the feudal stage to stride into *modern society*.** The achievements of a ***classical empire*** are indeed mesmerizing, but the factors decisively critical to the genesis of modern civilization must, in the end, pass through the crucible of a ***feudal society*** to emerge. Byzantium's history amply proves this point.

Given the right circumstances, even an exceptionally fleeting ***classical society*** is sufficient to realize a successful institutional transition and guide the state toward modernization; Japan is precisely such an example.

Therefore, no matter to what extent commerce and trade prolonged the ***classical period***, the core characteristic of ***classical society*** as a **"transition"** remains utterly unaltered. No matter how protracted the ***classical period*** may be, its utility remains strictly limited; **it can never supplant the historical mandate of a *feudal society*.**

9, Extreme Caution Must Be Exercised When Introducing Commercial Factors as Explanations

Furthermore, the introduction of commerce and trade as an explanatory variable should be strictly limited to those widely acknowledged regimes occupying superior geographical positions within colossal trade networks of pivotal significance in human history. It should absolutely not be applied indiscriminately to regimes with merely average participation in international trade or moderate reliance on commerce.

By applying this filter, we can isolate certain regimes that were clearly prematurely matured (早熟) due to international trade factors. Readers can obviously discern for themselves that many among these fall hopelessly short of being termed ***classical states*** (古典国家).

On the eastern segment of the Maritime Silk Road connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa, ***Southeast Asia***—acting as the ultimate crossroads between East and West—benefited tremendously. The Kingdom of Funan (扶南国) was the first formidable power to rise locally *(and also the earliest Southeast Asian state recorded by the Chinese)*.

During the centuries after Emperor Wu of Han extended maritime trade to China, navigational technology was not yet sufficient to make bypassing the Malay Peninsula via the Strait of Malacca a

lower-cost alternative to transporting goods overland across the Kra Isthmus (克拉地峡). Consequently, Funan prospered by virtue of strangling this vital communication choke point.

However, Funan clearly cannot be considered a ***classical state***. By the Tang Dynasty at the latest, advancements in navigational technology rendered the sea route via Malacca overwhelmingly advantageous, leading Funan straight into decline and collapse. The Chenla Kingdom (真腊王国) that annihilated Funan was not a **feudal regime** (封建政权) at all; rather, it was merely a ***pre-classical state*** (前古典国家). This regime endured a period of fragmentation before reunifying and ultimately forming the Khmer Empire (高棉帝国). It was only at this juncture that the Indochinese Peninsula genuinely entered a ***classical society*** (古典社会).

The regime that subsequently replaced Funan and securely perched upon the East-West crossroads due to shifting trade routes was Srivijaya (室利佛势 / 三佛齐). At its zenith, this regime's influence blanketed almost the entire Malay Peninsula and the Sunda Islands, elevating the Malay language to the status of the archipelago's ***lingua franca*** (四方通语). *(One easily notices that this is a quintessential characteristic of a* ***classical empire*** (古典帝国)*. To this day, the most populous ethnic group in Indonesia is the Javanese, whose ethnic language is Javanese; yet the official language of the nation remains Malay).*

However, according to Chinese historical records, right up until the era of Zheng He's voyages to the Western Oceans, the local socio-economic developmental level remained staggeringly backward. Following Srivijaya's decline, the subsequent ***feudalization*** (封建化) of maritime ***Southeast Asia*** was powerfully propelled by the widespread dissemination of Islam through commerce and missionary activities.

Turning our gaze to the westernmost terminus of the Maritime Silk Road, it is easy to note the Kingdom of Aksum (阿克苏姆王国), situated on the Horn of Africa strangling the Red Sea. This state boasted formidable royal power, constructed massive monumental architecture, and unprecedently expanded Ethiopia's borders all the way to Yemen. It promulgated the Ge'ez language (吉兹语)—classical Ethiopic, functioning as the ***lingua franca*** of the Horn of Africa—and was one of the earliest states in the world to officially adopt Christianity.

However, observers can also easily discern that this state was glaringly premature compared to ***classical empires*** born from normal **class transition**. Following the rise of Islam, the ***feudalization*** process spearheaded by Islam along the East African coast swiftly weakened *(beyond military assaults, stripping away Aksum's dominance over trade was obviously highly critical)* and

ultimately annihilated this kingdom. During the several centuries surrounding 1000 AD, the fate of the Ethiopian Christian state was exceedingly grim and ambiguous. It was not until the 13th century, when the Ethiopians retreated into the highland interior and began marching toward a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), that they were not only able to halt the Islamic offensive but also empowered the Christians to mount effective counterattacks.

Regimes of this nature also existed at the northernmost reaches of the Eurasian trade routes. An excellent example is the Khazar Khaganate (可萨汗国 / *"Khazar"* is also translated as 哈扎尔 in Chinese), established along the middle and lower reaches of the Volga River. This regime was not only situated on the main artery of the East-West Steppe Silk Road, but also engaged in massive North-South trade at the time—for instance, trafficking slaves from Eastern Europe to the Arab Empire.

The Byzantines had already noticed the stark distinctiveness of the Khazar regime. For example, they widely adopted Judaism, a monotheistic religion *(though highly likely confined to the aristocracy)*, and their cities were relatively developed. Thus, they were deemed "the most civilized branch among all the Turkic peoples."

But this obviously does not mean the Khazar Khaganate was a ***classical state***. After this regime was obliterated by the Rus' people, the local region rapidly reverted to a fragmented landscape of nomadic tribes. As for the lucrative trade routes upon which the Khazar Khaganate thrived, they flourished once again three or four centuries later during the rule of the Golden Horde *(as part of the Pax Mongolica)*. However, they plummeted into decline following Timur's invasions, and were entirely abandoned following the opening of the New Sea Routes (新航路开辟 / Age of Discovery).

In the distant south, the Black empires that arose in the Sahel region following the first wave of Islamization exhibited highly pronounced ***classical characteristics*** (古典特征). If the Mali Empire *(assuming it is even appropriate to call it an empire)* was still too primitive, then the Songhai Empire (桑海帝国) much more closely resembled a West African ***classical empire*** *(though, as I will elucidate later, I do not believe it was a true* ***classical empire*** *either).*

The Songhai people and the Mali people were separated by over 1,000 kilometers, situated respectively along the lower and upper reaches of the Niger River's bend. However, during the process where the Songhai people declared independence from Mali and ultimately superseded it *(superseding its dominant ruling status, without actually annihilating the latter)*, the entire region neither regressed into a fragmented landscape of tribes and primitive states, nor did it enter the ***feudalization*** phase. Instead, the Songhai people inherited the political legacy of the Mali Empire and further perfected its political institutions. For example, the Songhai Empire introduced standardized systems of weights and measures, established a professional standing army (职业常备

军), and exerted vastly stronger central administrative control over the localities than the previous era.

Although the southward invasion by the Moroccans triggered the collapse of the Songhai Empire, as previously stated, the ***feudalization*** of the Sahel belt did not commence immediately thereafter, and traditional mega-cities like Timbuktu and Djenné (杰内) indeed never recovered from the devastation.

This process indisputably proves that the core factor underpinning the establishment of a ***classical empire*** along the middle reaches of the Niger River back then was indeed the trans-Saharan trade. When this factor eventually vanished, the developmental level of the local society had fundamentally not yet reached the stage of ***Late Antiquity*** (古典时代晚期).

Following the opening of the New Sea Routes by the Portuguese, the trans-Saharan trade shifted eastward. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, a cluster of city-states sequentially emerged in the Hausa (豪萨) region. Further east, in the Chad region, the trans-Saharan trade might have emerged even earlier due to geographical reasons *(though there seemingly existed no high-value commodities worth mentioning for exchange here; the western regions later surpassed them via the gold-salt trade)*. Consequently, ***early states*** emerged here by the 8th century at the latest.

Riding the prosperity of the eastern trans-Saharan trade routes, following the zenith of the Songhai Empire, the Bornu Empire (博尔努帝国) situated in the Lake Chad basin entered its golden age. This regime primarily exported slaves, treating the Ottoman Empire—which had conquered North Africa—as its major trading partner.

Historical data indicates that the rulers of Bornu conspicuously lacked the desire to expand their territory and spread Islam to the peripheral *(southern)* tribes and minor kingdoms that still adhered to indigenous religions. This was because the rulers needed to harvest a steady supply of slaves from those regions. **This is glaringly a *pre-feudal* consciousness.** *(Though, because this regime was exceedingly rudimentary, it could hardly be considered a **classical empire** either).*

The Hausa city-states similarly benefited from the eastward shift of the trans-Saharan trade routes. The sustained social progress of this region was guaranteed, and it ultimately became the epicenter of the ***feudalizing*** Islamic Jihads in West Africa.

The myriad examples cited above are sufficient to illustrate that the specific circumstances under which commercial trade triggered local societal prematurity (早熟)—leading to the emergence of ***classical characteristics*** or even precocious entry into the ***classical period***—were exceedingly complex and defy sweeping generalizations.

Furthermore, readers can easily discern that **no matter how developed commerce and trade might be, they can absolutely never assist a state in executing a structural leap in social stages.** After these ascendant great powers met their end, let alone advancing into the **feudal stage**, some local societies completely regressed back to the level of ***early states***, or even devolved entirely into tribal states.

These stark historical facts serve as a solemn warning: **While incorporating commerce and trade as a corrective factor is profoundly necessary, overestimating their impact and abusing this explanation is intellectually toxic.**

10, The "Orientalization" of Rome Possessed Both an Active Monarchical Aspect and a Passive Aspect Driven by Social Development

Based on the preceding discussions, we can now form a vastly more comprehensive understanding of the entire history of Byzantium.

The Near East is not only the cradle of human civilization but also the geographical pivot of the Eurasian landmass. Ever since the earliest batch of cities in human history emerged here, commercial activities and international trade have consistently played an exceedingly vital role across the entire region; the massive volume of commercial documents inscribed on clay tablets is ample proof of this.

The circulation sustained by commerce and trade is not only the very reason Byzantium achieved its "longevity," but perhaps even the formation of the concept of the "Byzantine Empire" itself owes its existence to it.

For instance, one easily notices that the **"Orientalization"** (东方化) of the Roman Empire obviously did not commence merely after the partition of the Eastern and Western empires, but rather unfolded across practically the entire imperial period of Rome. Traditionally, people's explanation for this issue is that the Eastern Mediterranean world boasted a profound history, advanced culture, and a highly developed economy, possessing an irresistible allure for Roman rulers. Therefore, Rome's ideology and culture increasingly *(and proactively)* gravitated toward the East, eventually leading the locus of ruling power to gradually shift eastward as well.

This explanation clearly reveals one aspect of "Orientalization." However, we absolutely must not forget that from an economic perspective, "Orientalization" obviously possessed another distinct dimension.

Not only did a ***classical empire*** itself rely heavily on developed circulation *(hence the proliferation of cities)*, but Rome, as an empire expanding outward from a city-state, retained numerous traditions from its city-state era within its original institutional framework. Thus, it is vividly apparent that

urban civic life constituted an indispensable component of the order Romans considered inherently natural and proper.

Yet, no matter how glorious Rome was, it could never transcend the immutable laws of social development. **When Rome's *classical society* developed to its absolute zenith, feudalizing factors inevitably surfaced.**

Historians can effortlessly observe that during the late Roman Empire, this colossal regime experienced the exact same phenomenon that the Eastern Han Dynasty experienced over two centuries prior: the explosive proliferation of the ***manorial economy*** (庄园经济), both in the western and eastern halves of the empire.

Therefore, we can place ourselves in the shoes of the Roman ruling elites of that era, and even pretend to be the rulers during the Crisis of the Third Century, to easily comprehend their perspective. Although the people of that era could not possibly have possessed an accurate understanding of the ***feudalization*** process, let alone know where ***feudalization*** would drag the world, one phenomenon they could definitively observe was this: **Urban life was visibly decaying across the entire expanse of the empire.**

The turmoil of the third century exacerbated people's anxieties. They likely hypothesized that there existed some intrinsic connection between the decay of urban life and political turbulence *(and looking back from our modern perspective, this was obviously correct)*. Rome's political tradition was fundamentally inseparable from urban life; the official designation of this regime was *"The Senate and People of Rome"* (Senatus Populusque Romanus / SPQR). **If the city ceased to exist, where, then, would the Senate be?**

Observers have every reason to suspect that the Roman rulers of that era harbored an intense desire to restore their past glory. Their shift was not a conscious pivot toward the East, but rather a conscious endeavor to **preserve Rome's own political traditions.**

Consequently, the imperial rulers observed the following dynamic: Although urban life was decaying across the entire empire, the magnitude of this decay was markedly smaller in the East. **This was because commercial activities and international trade** *(of course, trade itself is a form of commercial activity; I continuously single it out here to emphasize its specific role, particularly in generating circulation)* **effectively "hedged against" (对冲掉) a portion of the impact of *feudalization.***

Simultaneously, the geopolitical characteristics of the city of Rome itself underwent a monumental mutation. When the entire periphery of the Mediterranean was enveloped in a ***classical society*** characterized by highly developed cities and a ***commodity economy***, Rome's geographical centrality largely represented its central position within the nation's economic activities.

However, once ***feudalization*** commenced, a duality emerged. On one hand, commercial and trade factors in the eastern half of the empire hedged against part of ***feudalization***'s impact. On the other hand, the rapid advancement of ***feudalization*** in the western half of the empire severely crippled local economic activities and severed economic ties with other regions—after all, a paramount characteristic of an ***early feudal society*** is a ***natural economy*** (自然经济).

Although I am unaware if any scholar has ever completed such an exercise, suppose we plotted the state of circulation within the Roman Empire at two distinct timestamps: 100 AD and 350 AD. If we used the density of lines to represent the volume of circulation, it is effortless to deduce that, from the perspective of circulation volume, the empire's **"centre of mass"** (质心 / economic center of gravity) in 350 AD was glaringly far further east than it was in 100 AD, steadily drifting away from the city of Rome—the very birthplace of the empire.

In 364 AD, during an oration delivered to **Valens** (瓦伦斯), the brother of **Valentinian I** (瓦伦提尼安一世), the philosopher and orator **Themistius** (德密斯修) implicitly contrasted Constantinople with Rome. He emphasized the latter's deficiencies as an imperial capital: Constantinople connects the two continents of Europe and Asia; it is an anchorage for maritime needs, a market for land and sea trade, and the jewel of Roman rule. Because it is not isolated from main thoroughfares like some sacred region (referring to Rome). If the emperor stays in Constantinople for affairs of state, it does not inconvenience his handling of public duties. On the contrary, it is an inevitable crossroads for people traveling to and fro. Therefore, if the emperor establishes his capital here, he is positioned at the exact center of the entire empire.

In fact, we must point out that the choice made by the Romans as their ***classical empire*** approached its twilight was highly universal. **Al-Tabari** (塔巴里), the great historian of the Islamic Golden Age, recorded in his *History of the Prophets and Kings* (*Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* /《先知与历代帝王编年史》) that when the Abbasid caliph **Al-Mansur** (曼苏尔) was surveying the site for his new capital, he also praised Baghdad's location with deep emotion as a commercial hub where boats and caravans converged. As classical India approached its end, Kannauj, situated in the middle reaches of the Ganges River, replaced the political status of Pataliputra in the lower Ganges—a status the latter had held for centuries. Kannauj was closer to the geometric center of Northern India, and in Xuanzang's *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (《大唐西域记》), it was identically described as a place where "all goods gather and merchants congregate". In classical China, the imperial capital shifted from Chang'an to Luoyang shortly after the beginning of the Common Era. Although the *Rhapsody on the Two Capitals* (《两都赋》), *Rhapsody on the Two Metropolises* (《两京赋》), and *Rhapsody on the Three Capitals* (《三都赋》), when discussing Luoyang's advantages, emphasized its location as the "Center of the Oikumene" (天下之中) and its orthodox

status, it is undeniable that Luoyang was significantly closer to the geometric center of economic and human circulation on the East Asian continent than Chang'an was.

Readers will gain a more detailed understanding of why universal capital relocations occurred during the late period of ***classical empires*** after reading Chapter 12. During the formative period, the regime that ultimately establishes a vast empire is generally located on the periphery of civilization; the geopolitical advantages forged during ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) helped it complete the great cause of unification. However, conquering the realm and ruling the realm (打天下与坐天下) are, after all, fundamentally different. Especially as ***classical society*** (古典社会) approaches its end, the empire's original heartland—which served as its capital—becomes marginalized within the circulation networks. Consequently, rulers must consider shifting the political center toward the center of gravity of the circulation networks to suppress the ever-growing costs of governance (this will be discussed in Chapter 13, Section 14), resulting in a widespread transfer of political centers.

As to whether this transfer moves closer to or further from the borders, it depends entirely on the economic geography facing the regime. For Rome, ***the Near East*** had experienced frequent interaction and high economic development over millennia; thus, the result of relocating the capital was leaving Rome for Constantinople, which was situated closer to the frontline. For China, relatively isolated in Eastern Asia, international trade played a truly negligible role in the empire's economy. Therefore, the target of the capital relocation, Luoyang, was closer to the geometric geographical center of the Chinese hinterland, actually moving further away from the border than Chang'an. Yet, can we possibly claim that the border threats faced by the Chinese Empire from the Eastern Han to the Western Jin were not worth mentioning? If we observe the principle that "universal phenomena should be given priority to universal explanations," then economic factors should obviously be regarded as a primary driving factor in the issue of the "Easternization of Rome."

In this way, we witness the other side of Rome's "Orientalization" process: It was not a move to discard Rome's intrinsic traditions, but precisely the opposite—to safeguard Rome's intrinsic traditions, the imperial rule inevitably had to shift eastward. *(Beyond preserving Rome's traditions, "Orientalization" was also inevitably about preserving the traditions of a classical bureaucratic empire. Urban civic life is both a hallmark of* ***classical society*** *and a crucial sustaining factor for a* ***classical bureaucratic state /古典官僚国家)****.*

As the Emperor and the ruling apparatus relocated to the East, they had no choice but to compromise with Eastern cultural traditions—such as declaring the legalization of Christianity. Over time, it appeared as though every inherent fixture of the East had been absorbed by the empire. In terms of political institutions, religion, and language, it exhibited such glaring differences from the original empire that ruled from Rome that it was derisively dubbed the "Greek Empire" by mischief-makers, or by the name we commonly use today: the Byzantine Empire.

As for where the "New Rome" should be constructed after abandoning the old one? It obviously had to be a location that could best sustain circulation and urban life, while simultaneously being easily defensible against the impact of ***feudalization***—an impact the empire dreaded, yet knew was inevitable. For instance, one easily notices that ***feudalization*** means not only urban decay but also **"castellation" (**堡垒化 **/ encastellation).** This does not merely mean that emerging ***feudal lords*** ruled their domains from impregnable fortresses; even within the surviving ***classical society*** of ***the Near East***, urban morphology mutated. Cities shrank in scale, relocated from plains and valleys to easily defensible slopes, and were fortified with defensive structures like city walls.

During that era *(what Western scholars term **Late Antiquity** /* 古典时代晚期*)*, what place in the entire world could simultaneously satisfy the requirements of building a metropolis, occupying a supreme position for commercial and trade activities, while simultaneously possessing absolute geographical superiority for military defense?

I believe that even a profoundly learned scholar who has traversed the four corners of the earth could not find a better location than Constantinople. **The birth of the Byzantine Empire was precisely the manifestation forged by the collision of two opposing movements: the universal progression of *feudalization*, and the *Near East*'s developed commercial activities hedging against that very *feudalization*.**

However, as demonstrated by the ultimate annihilation of Byzantium, even though Rome dodged the shockwaves of the first wave of ***feudalization*** through its eastward strategic retreat, the decay of urban life and the unfolding of ***feudalization*** remained inexorably unstoppable.

The city-state traditions, which had somewhat survived in the Roman Empire due to the prosperity of urban economies during the ***classical period***, vanished entirely. In the beginning, Constantinople indeed possessed a Senate, but its power grew increasingly feeble until it vanished completely from public view. Latin slogans ceased to be used, and eventually, the Latin language itself was forgotten in the Eastern Empire.

Even though Byzantium raked in astronomical fortunes through trade due to its divinely blessed geographical location, the burgher class (市民阶层)—as a faction capable of playing a pivotal role in national policy—ultimately exited the historical stage. **The Nika riots (**尼卡暴动**) wrote the final page in the glorious history of city-state citizenry dating back to ancient Greece.**

Consequently, many lament: *"Citizens were reduced to subjects. This Eastern Empire learned nothing else from its neighbors further east, but perfectly mastered the arts of castrating men and forcing them to kneel."*

In the Eurocentric perspective, this mutation of Byzantium is viewed as a drift toward **"Oriental Despotism" (**东方专制主义**).**

However, we must point out that there is essentially no such thing as "Oriental Despotism." It is merely that Greece and Rome, due to historical and geographical reasons, possessed extremely developed commercial activities. Merchants and burghers played a vastly larger role there than in other regions, allowing the political model of the city-state to be somewhat prolonged. In the geographically vastly different "East," the traditions of the city-state had long since become untraceable following the demise of the city-states themselves.

The participation of merchants and burghers in politics can effectively curb despotism. This is not only because their occupations render them the group with the strongest awareness of rights in the **pre-feudal era**—highly valuing credibility and contracts, and capable of fighting for their interests from relatively flexible standpoints. Furthermore, given the level of societal plurality sustainable by the ***productive forces*** and consciousness of that era, having multiple factions participating in the political game is never a bad thing. After all, it was difficult to have so many political factions that society plunged into total chaos. *(Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that a class with shared interests might splinter into numerous small, personality-driven cliques; but if this results in severe consequences, it fundamentally constitutes an organizational failure).*

For example, it is easy to imagine: if a state possesses exactly two primary, antagonistic interest groups, the monarch can easily expand his own power by playing them against each other *(a balancing act between two factions)*. Rulers during the transitional phase between two class societies would constantly employ this maneuver *(of course, sometimes this balance also exists between the ruling class and the ruled class)*.

But if the number of major interest groups reaches three or four, then there exist diverse possibilities for alliances and confrontations among them *(especially since merchants and burghers can adopt highly flexible positions)*. This embodies what the Chinese often call **"uniting the weak to attack the strong"** (合众弱以攻一强), rather than a two-party hostility where the weaker side can only desperately seek the monarch's favoritism. Under these circumstances, it becomes astronomically more difficult for the monarch to expand his power by pandering to both sides (左右逢源).

Therefore, Byzantium's increasing drift toward "Oriental Despotism" was undoubtedly a reconfiguration of the ***superstructure*** triggered by mutations in the ***economic base***. **It absolutely cannot be entirely blamed on the subjective actions of Byzantine emperors pursuing the *despotic power* enjoyed by their Persian peers.**

In fact, one will observe that the Byzantine monarchs from the 7th century onward fundamentally lacked the mature mechanisms possessed by the emperors of the ***restoration-bureaucratic*** (复辟官

僚制的) Chinese empires to maintain despotic rule—mechanisms forged through a perfected bureaucratic system and designed to antagonize the ***landlord class***. Let alone suppressing ambitious warlords in the provinces, the Byzantine emperors often struggled even to cope with conspiracies behind their own palace walls **(**萧墙之内的阴谋**).** For the emperors of the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, such a degree of imperial impotence would be utterly unimaginable.

11, The Similarities Between Byzantium and China, Especially in the Behavior of Their Rulers

To a Chinese person like myself, the most dramatic and simultaneously the most profoundly sigh-inducing aspect of Byzantine history is how astonishingly similar the events unfolding in these two vastly separated nations were.

Archaeological research conducted on pre-Arab-conquest Byzantine villages along the banks of the Orontes River (奥龙特斯河) in Syria has revealed something extraordinary. When selecting sites and constructing their dwellings, local residents heavily prioritized defense. Their structures featured central courtyards and were mostly two-story buildings—humans inhabited the second floor, while livestock were penned on the ground floor. Furthermore, the villages glaringly lacked public architecture.

For anyone with extensive experience visiting museums in our country, this specific design and layout is shockingly identical to the pottery architectural models (陶楼/坞堡模型) proliferating during the Eastern Han Dynasty, which depicted the rural villages of northern China during the initial stages of ***feudalization*****.** *(From a functional perspective, it is obvious that such architecture represented a transitional state from the manors of landed aristocrats to the castles of* ***feudal lords****. Of course, the architectural prowess of ancient China fundamentally could not rival that of the Mediterranean region, hence the two-story structures depicted in Eastern Han artifacts look considerably more strained).*

What a potent proof this is that societies situated in the exact same social stage under similar natural conditions will inevitably make highly analogous choices.

When Arab Muslims conquered a colossal expanse stretching from India to the Atlantic Ocean in merely a century, the Byzantine Empire suddenly appeared to be tottering on the brink of collapse. At this exact juncture, the rulers of the Byzantine Empire resorted to the exact same stratagem as their Chinese peers: **Releasing certain feudal factors to survive the crisis.**

Although written records are scarce *(allegedly because a massive volume of documents was incinerated during the Iconoclastic Controversy)*, one can still discover from limited evidence that after Byzantium suffered devastating blows—losing the Levant, Egypt, and North Africa—a military institution known as the **"Thema system"** (军区制) emerged.

Financially strapped, the empire abandoned attempting to maintain and arm the troops of these military districts using cash as it did in the past. Instead, it relied on the exploitation of designated lands within the districts, granting land as remuneration for soldiers' military service. This forged the military-land-tenure system (军役土地制) Byzantium adopted to counter the Islamic threat.

A Chinese reader easily realizes that, absent supplementary data, what we are looking at is essentially the Byzantine version of the so-called **"Fubing system"** (府兵制 / Divisional Militia system) operating from the Western Wei to the early Tang Dynasty. Even more fascinating is that, although we do not know precisely during which period of the 7th century the Thema system emerged, at that very moment, China's Fubing system had not yet entirely vanished.

Military-tenure lands rapidly expanded nationwide. These land-grant soldiers, brimming with the fervor to defend their own homes, served as the absolute mainstay in resisting invasions. Factually speaking, Byzantium's frontier crisis was indeed contained. Faced with an existential crisis, the Byzantine monarchs had no choice but to rely heavily on these soldiers, who were progressively transforming into ***feudal lords*** (封建领主).

For example, during the **Iconoclasm** (破坏圣像运动)—which persisted intermittently for a century—several Byzantine emperors acted twofold. On one hand, under the guise of prohibiting idolatry, they cracked down on the Christian Church, fortifying the emperor's absolute authority relative to the Church. On the other hand, the lion's share of the expropriated Church lands fell into the hands of the **military aristocracy** (军事贵族) as fiefs, massively accelerating the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process of the entire nation.

By the latter half of the 8th century, as the Arab Empire inherited the classical systems of the conquered regions, the eastern frontiers of the Byzantine Empire became secure once again. At this time, the primary threats the empire faced were ***barbarians*** undergoing their own ***feudalization*** processes in the direction of the Balkans, such as the Bulgarians, as well as occasional threats from the Rus' people in the north. But the military strength of these enemies was insufficient—especially when confronting the defensive systems in and around Constantinople. At most, they would reach the suburbs and then demand a ransom to leave it at that.

Not to mention, Byzantium possessed an ideological secret weapon: **Orthodox Christianity** *(although the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches had not yet formally occurred).* As the religious and cultural motherland of these potential enemies, Byzantium occupied an overwhelmingly dominant psychological position, making strategies like "***using barbarians to control barbarians***" (以夷制夷) effortlessly effective.

By the latter half of the 9th century, the Abbasid Caliphate began to disintegrate amidst its own ***feudalization*** process. The threat posed by the fragmented emirates of the ***early feudal period*** (封建早期) was far less dire than that of a unified Caliphate. The Byzantines were even capable of launching counteroffensives against the Muslims, such as the reconquest of Crete.

By the 10th century, Byzantium stood as the solitary surviving relic of the ***classical era***, standing out like a crane among a flock of chickens (鹤立鸡群) on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. While neighboring regions plunged into disintegration due to their ***feudalization*** processes, Byzantium's relative advantages actually expanded—highly likely including its commercial advantages.

Internally, however, the ***degree of feudalization*** within this regime had already grown phenomenally high. For example, we still possess knowledge of the poetry generated within the society of ***feudal lords*** along the empire's eastern frontier back then. There existed a genre of poetry perfectly situated somewhere between the *Chansons de Geste* (武功歌 / Songs of Heroic Deeds) of European **feudal** knights and the Frontier Poetry (边塞诗) of China's Tang Dynasty. *(Fascinatingly, Byzantine society was indeed suspended exactly between these two types of societies).* These works predominantly extolled the ferocious martial prowess of the generals and soldiers on the Byzantine frontiers. Among them, the epic tale of a hero named **Digenes Akritas** (迪格内斯-阿克里塔斯) is exceptionally legendary; there was likely not a single soul across the entire Near Eastern world back then who did not know his name.

However, although Byzantine emperors could acutely realize that ***feudalization*** possessed an unparalleled superiority in resisting foreign enemies, they were equally aware that it constituted a highly dangerous enemy to an ***absolute monarch***. In fact, around the turn of the 7th and 8th centuries, the emperors had already tasted the bitter fruits of army mutinies.

The Byzantine emperors found themselves trapped in a structural dead end. On one hand, they lacked the ruthless mechanisms of Chinese emperors capable of utterly crushing the ***feudal lords***, reducing them to a mere ***landlord class*** posing absolutely zero threat to imperial power. On the other hand, they were glaringly unwilling to relinquish their exalted status as the universal monarchs inheriting the legacy of Rome, nor their cherished bureaucratic systems. It was impossible for them to proactively converge toward the ***feudal system*** (封建制度) already realized in Western Europe—where the monarch merely acted as the highest-ranking among all **feudal** aristocrats *(primus inter pares)*, constrained by a multitude of **feudal** contracts.

Under these circumstances where the state degenerated into a "chimera" (四不像 / neither fish nor fowl), it was fundamentally impossible for the Byzantines to discover a method for long-term political stability. The emperor himself could not even form a potent deterrent against the

formidable aristocrats under his rule. Aside from the sheer inertia of people obeying the emperor, the only recourse was likely utilizing the central treasury—fattened by commercial activities—to organize a powerful standing army.

Consequently, the moment Byzantine emperors perceived a reduction in external pressure, they would spawn the exact same idea as Chinese monarchs: **Prioritize the liquidation of "potential enemies" domestically.**

The most illustrious monarch of the Macedonian dynasty, Basil II (巴西尔二世), was precisely a monarch cut from the exact same cloth as Li Shimin (李世民 / Emperor Taizong of Tang). They both relied heavily on their spectacular martial achievements in suppressing rebellions and conquering enemies to massively fortify monarchical power, throwing the process of ***feudalization*** into full reverse. *(Though, naturally, Basil II's capacity to reverse history was nowhere near comparable to Li Shimin's).*

Basil II utilized every conceivable machination to sever the ties between the aristocrats and their land. He contrived methods to confiscate their estates and prevent them from acquiring new land through purchase or donation. He frequently ordered military redeployments to harass the aristocrats relentlessly, and simultaneously hiked the taxes levied upon ***feudal lords***.

Factually speaking, while he was alive, he indeed leveraged the formidable prestige forged through decades of constant warfare to enforce many of these policies. To use a Chinese phrase, he *"vigorously struck down the local powerful elites"* (有力打击了地方豪强).

Such machinations merely brought about a fleeting era of brilliance, but in reality, **they shoved the nation a massive step closer to the abyss of death.** Although Byzantium possessed a magnificent capital like Constantinople, it could not hide behind a massive plateau and sustain a closed, self-sufficient universe for millennia like China did. As Western Europe began entering the ***High Middle Ages***, and the nomadic tribes of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** flooded into the **feudalized** Islamic world, the Byzantine Empire's life entered its final countdown.

However, there is a fascinating anecdote worth mentioning here. As the Middle Byzantine Empire marched toward revival in the 10th century, Byzantium once again displayed a panorama of classical prosperity.

Byzantine scholars imported from the disintegrating Arab Empire *(while naturally conducting their own excavations as well)* the achievements of classical civilization collected and organized by Arab scholars, alongside new discoveries the Arabs had forged.

Subsequently, propelled by Crusader assaults on Byzantium and the ultimate demise of the Byzantine Empire itself, these academic achievements journeyed to **feudal** Europe—either through outright plunder or carried by fleeing exiles.

Across this vast expanse stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the mountains of Afghanistan—constituting the mainstream world of human civilization—**the "temporal lag" (时差) generated by the varying social developmental stages produced this profoundly dramatic impact.** And the European Western society that ultimately reaped the final harvest was undeniably the luckiest of all.

12, The Byzantine Empire Brought About Its Own Destruction

Since Byzantine emperors were utterly incapable of completely domesticating the ***landlord class*** as Chinese emperors did, yet simultaneously exhibited blatant hostility toward the nation's **military aristocracy** (军事贵族), the intensification of political struggle and the subsequent crippling of the state's capacity to confront crises were absolute inevitabilities.

In the mid-11th century, the Normans closed in from the West, while the Turks simultaneously advanced from the East. Byzantium had indeed faced myriad enemies in the past, but those were either ***barbarians*** just barely transitioning from a tribal state into preliminary ***feudalization*** (封建化), or ***classical states*** exactly like Byzantium itself. However, what was now plunging into the empire's heartland were highly organized **feudal military regimes** and **feudalized nomadic empires.**

To a large extent, the Byzantine Empire had managed to survive previously because its eastern neighbors—Persia and the Arab Empire—despite being overtly hostile, were ultimately states possessing ***classical characteristics*** (古典特征). For Byzantium, when fighting such regimes, even if territory was temporarily lost, recovering it was not out of the question. However, the increasingly **feudalized** Turks were an entirely different breed of enemy.

The Turks closed in on Anatolia. This not only meant the state faced assaults from **feudal regimes** (封建政权) on both its eastern and western flanks simultaneously, but crucially, the Turks had achieved a ***degree of feudalization*** that meant they no longer waged war solely for the purpose of plundering populations and wealth. They no longer employed extensive, loose administration over temporarily occupied regions. Instead, **they would firmly control their conquered territories strictly in accordance with (Islamic) feudal relations.** The drastic mutation in this geopolitical landscape precipitated the decline and fall of Byzantium. In the latter half of the 11th century, the entire empire suffered catastrophic, devastating military defeats.

Although Alexios I (阿莱克修斯一世) managed to turn the tide and temporarily stabilize the situation through masterful political maneuvering, one could plainly see that these measures could no longer save the empire. To resolve the contradiction between the emperor and the great aristocratic clans *(to use a Sinicized expression,* 大世族*)*, Alexios resorted to forcing the Komnenos family (科穆宁家族) to deeply bind itself through marriage with other powerful aristocratic houses. Simultaneously, he saturated the bureaucratic apparatus with members of the Komnenos family or aristocrats possessing Komnenian bloodlines.

One cannot say this maneuver was entirely ineffective—after all, for the next three-plus centuries until Byzantium's demise, every Byzantine emperor possessed Komnenian blood. But regarding salvaging the decaying Byzantine state, it was utterly futile. **The aristocratization of the bureaucratic system is fundamentally not synonymous with *feudalization***, just as one cannot consider the Eastern Jin Dynasty (东晋) a **feudal regime.**

Another monumental shift in Byzantine policy during Alexios's reign was the introduction of massive foreign assistance. Examples include granting commercial privileges to Italians *(Venetians and Genoese)* and pleading with Catholic Latin states for the Crusades. Judging by subsequent events, this was undeniably the definitive marker that Byzantium could no longer alleviate its crises through its own strength.

By the late Komnenian dynasty, the Byzantine Empire's finances had deteriorated catastrophically. The imperial court found it nearly impossible to levy taxes across the vast majority of its territory, as massive tracts of land had been usurped by aristocrats and the Church. Furthermore, as Italian merchants established increasingly expansive commercial privileges and built colonial enclaves within Byzantine territory, the empire collected practically zero commercial tax revenue in Constantinople.

Ironically, to maintain the prestigious façade of "Rome," Byzantium required astronomical investments into Constantinople. **Consequently, the great capital of this *classical state*—the very symbol of urban civic life—had now degenerated into a bottomless financial black hole.**

The imperial fiscal revenue basically equated merely to the private estate income of the Komnenos family's lands. How could this possibly continue to sustain a ***classical bureaucratic state*** (古典官僚国家)?

The more impoverished the imperial court became, the more its deterrence against the provinces evaporated. The Komnenos family, or the families deeply intermarried with them, monopolized every facet of the empire; it was perfectly normal for several ambitious claimants to the throne to pop up. Thus, the more weakened the empire became, the more ferocious the political struggles

grew; and the more ferocious the civil wars grew, the further the empire was weakened. All factions in these political struggles raced to invite foreign powers into the fray, thereby weakening Byzantium even further. The Byzantines had entirely given up any hope of defending their own nation by themselves. The fact that Byzantine emperors repeatedly considered submitting to the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for aid from the Latin world merely to eke out a survival is the ultimate proof of this.

Yet, history staged one final, profoundly thought-provoking spectacle before Byzantium finally exited the stage.

Following the Fourth Crusade's capture of Constantinople, that symbol of the classical bureaucratic empire—and that catastrophic financial black hole—suddenly vanished for the successors of the Byzantine Empire. If we observe the Empire of Nicaea (尼西亚帝国), which would eventually reconquer Byzantium, we discover that this regime heavily resembled the **feudal regimes** established by the neighboring nomadic Turks.

The Nicaean emperor, acting as the supreme commander of this colossal armed nomadic confederacy, completely discarded all that nonsensical baggage about "***classical states***," "urban civic life," and "bureaucratic systems." He led his royal encampment (行在), constantly moving about the river valleys of western Anatolia. As for Nicaea itself, rather than calling it a capital, it was more accurately a center of religious faith formed because the Ecumenical Patriarch lived there in exile. The emperor's mobile court was absent for the majority of the time, occasionally even crossing the sea to camp in Europe.

This government-in-exile not only occupied the economically developed and densely populated river valleys of western Anatolia, but it completely shed the crushing burdens of a bureaucratic empire required to act like a "true" Byzantine Empire. **Consequently, it erupted with terrifying vitality.** The army of this regime was composed of Turks and hired European knights; cavalry formed its absolute core, with little to no Greek infantry present. At its zenith, it could deploy an army of 20,000 onto the European battlefield. Considering that the overwhelming majority of these 20,000 troops were cavalry, this constituted a formidable force that absolutely could not be underestimated, even in ***High Middle Ages*** Europe.

The tragic irony of this story is that the moment this regime recaptured Constantinople—a city the Latin regime itself didn't even want anymore—**all the symptoms of the "Byzantine Disease," which the Crusaders had inadvertently "cured," returned with a vengeance, not missing a single one.** Even during the very process of rebuilding Byzantium, the emperor was forced to continue granting trade privileges to the Genoese in exchange for naval support.

The new consciousness that Orthodox Byzantines had developed during their exile *(which possessed distinct **feudal characteristics**)*—such as a self-identification as "Greeks" and a militant

irredentism (复国主义) emphasizing military struggle—faded rapidly the moment the Byzantine Empire was reconstructed.

From the moment Michael VIII Palaiologos (米海尔八世) abandoned the **feudal** military lifestyle with nomadic traits and trudged back onto the fatal dead-end path of a ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家), all the way down to the Palaiologan dynasty (巴列奥略王朝) in 1453... at least from the perspective of historical lessons, I believe there are absolutely no further stories worth mentioning.

However, we must also neutrally point out that within academia, there remains debate over whether Constantinople was indeed a financial black hole, and if so, *when* it became one. Nevertheless, it is a relatively definitive fact that the financial situation of the Empire of Nicaea was quite healthy, whereas after the Palaiologan dynasty recaptured Constantinople, the state finances continuously deteriorated until they entirely collapsed. Overall, maintaining the ***late-classical imperial system***—symbolized by the capital of Constantinople—was, at least fiscally, more detrimental than beneficial to Byzantium.

Some might argue: *The problem wasn't Constantinople; rather, the empire had already lost Anatolia and was thus beyond saving.* The reality is that Constantinople itself was certainly not at fault. But if Byzantine emperors continued to daydream day after day about a universal empire and stubbornly refused ***feudalization***, then holding onto Anatolia would have been fundamentally impossible anyway.

Up to this point, by untangling the entire history of the Byzantine Empire, we can explicitly pinpoint its differences from China. The birth and continuation of Byzantium were the outcome of the dual influences of ***feudalization*** and the counteracting force generated by commercial activities. Barring the Fourth Crusade, Byzantium's ***classical bureaucratic system*** existed relatively continuously until its final moments. The impact of ***feudalization*** upon the Byzantine Empire steadily expanded since its inception and was never genuinely weakened; Byzantine emperors never discovered a systemic method to curb ***feudalism***.

This is starkly different from China, which experienced drastic mutations in its political system during its ***feudalization*** period and its ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** *(of course, this is not to say Byzantium experienced no obvious changes, but one only needs to compare it with China to see how exceedingly mild the former's were)*. Moreover, the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) in China ultimately and completely suffocated any potential challenges posed by the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级).

Therefore, from the perspective of a Chinese person—though this might seem somewhat biased—I must assert: **The existence of Byzantium as a *classical bureaucratic state* was dominated by "natural factors."** The nation was propelled toward an unpredictable destiny, and the participants

within it, including the emperors, were merely making limited adjustments in passive compliance with shifting tides.

In stark contrast, the Chinese Empire that achieved bureaucratic restoration did so because its rulers **consciously, meticulously, and purposefully utilized every available circumstance and mechanism to reverse the *feudalization* process via a rigorously *oppressive bureaucratic system*.** They continuously intensified despotic centralization with the singular goal of transforming everyone aside from the emperor into slaves utterly stripped of power and dignity.

If Byzantium is considered "evil," its depravity never exceeded the boundaries outlined in Machiavelli's *The Prince*—at most, it featured a cunning, battle-hardened monarch exhausting every conceivable machination to consolidate his rule, exactly like Basil II.

But our nation, over the past millennium, has almost successfully actualized the ancient dystopian dream of Lord Shang (商鞅): *To design an institutional machine so absolute that even the most stupid, the most brutal, and the most utterly devoid of morality ruler who acquires power through hereditary succession can utilize the authority bestowed by the system to whip and flog slaves who are vastly smarter and stronger than himself.*

I absolutely refuse to concede that these two types of evil can even be mentioned in the same breath. This is exactly why, while criticizing the Byzantine Empire, I simultaneously defend it: because I do not want anyone to conflate Byzantium with the Chinese Empire.

In fact, one can discover the glaring disparities between the two civilizations even from their surface manifestations. Byzantium undoubtedly relied upon the circulation generated by commerce for its existence. Conversely, the restored Chinese Empire utterly despised *any* circulation that was not strictly controlled by the bureaucratic apparatus *(because such circulation endangers the regime itself. During the Qing Dynasty, this was slightly relaxed because China became enmeshed in the international market).*

*(Actually, this is another issue I omitted when previously discussing the Eight Banners state: what the Qing rulers observed when analyzing Ming administration. The Ming Dynasty's political system, during its design and stabilization phases, never accounted for the possibility of massive integration into the global market! This resulted in the late Ming **bureaucratic state** experiencing a total systemic failure when attempting to control regions like Jiangnan—regions entering the global market, where the forms and scale of commerce and circulation were astronomically beyond what a closed-door state could comprehend. This was obviously a massive catalyst for the political turmoil of the late Ming).*

The concept of the *Luyin* (路引 / strict travel permits) is the glaring criminal evidence of ***Late Imperial China*** (晚期中华帝国) attempting to imprison its people within microscopic territorial

confines. What sustained a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** was not a relatively free market, but the entire bureaucratic apparatus continuously extracting and forcing the unnatural flow of social wealth.

Even though we have seen that Byzantine history does not lack choices *(made by emperors)* similar to those of the Chinese Empire, and Byzantine people, like the Chinese, viewed the systems of a ***classical empire*** as **"*Towering Mountains*"** (重冈俊阜), Byzantium could never have imagined—nor could it ever have executed—what the Chinese Empire did: **Mandating the unnatural deaths of tens of millions of people over five centuries strictly to forcibly provision the highly centralized capital of a despotic empire.** *(The absolute peak population of the entire Byzantine Empire was, at most, 30 million).*

Therefore, to distinguish them by nomenclature: based on the concept of "***Late Antiquity***" (古典时代晚期) proposed by Western scholars, and considering that Byzantium was formed during this very era, I designate a ***classical bureaucratic state*** like Byzantium—which persisted for a massively prolonged period **post-classical era**—as a **"*Late-classical bureaucratic state*"** (晚期古典官僚国家). *(We will set the Arab Empire aside for now).*

Finally, I still wish to emphasize that prior to the ***modern era***, agricultural production was the absolute pillar of society and regime in every civilized region of the world, regardless of how crucial commercial revenue might have been to the rulers. Commercial factors can indeed exert a monumental impact on the lifespan of a ***classical state***, **but they can absolutely never alter the fundamental nature of *classical society*.**

As the history of Byzantium—and the tragic reality of late Byzantine Constantinople deteriorating into an albatross around the empire's neck—amply demonstrates: Even if commerce can effectively hedge against the impact of ***feudalization*** and significantly prolong a ***classical society***, **the circulation and prosperity it generates are fundamentally insufficient to unlock the doors to *modernity*.**

I fear this is the greatest, most devastating lesson Byzantium has imparted to humanity thousands of years later.

Chapter 12: Adjustments on Historical Periodization

1, Why Write This Massive Chapter

If potential readers have read from the beginning to this point, they should already be highly familiar with my historical perspectives. Even if I were to omit this section, they could likely deduce my general views on historical periodization.

People might accuse me of being excessively radical: *I originally set out merely to comprehend the historical processes that transpired in China, yet now I have entangled myself in the macro-development of the entire human civilization. This hardly seems like something an ordinary Chinese university student should be undertaking.*

I do not deny this in the slightest. Nor is it possible that I have never doubted myself. I am an ordinary person—as ordinary as one can possibly be. How dare I covet the monumental feats that only heroes like Sir Isaac Newton could achieve? Even so, I have decided to write down these words, and I wish to first explain my reasons here.

First, my reflections on the practical issues of China have ultimately and profoundly altered my worldview, and especially my historical perspective. How to periodize history is fundamentally an essential issue within one's historical perspective. Therefore, if I do not document the conclusions I have reached after critically sublating (扬弃) the various historical periodization theories proposed by predecessors dating back to the dawn of religion, I would essentially be omitting the absolute core of my thinking.

Second, after obtaining preliminary conclusions based on the histories of China, Japan, and Europe, I tested these conclusions utilizing the various historical stages of other regions across the globe. In my view, the results of this testing are exceptionally gratifying. This theory, derived from contemplating Chinese history, obviously does not apply exclusively to a single nation like China. This theory can holistically explain the significance and status of each stage in the developmental trajectory of human civilization to date.

Furthermore, it substantially eliminates the interference of ***social concepts*** (社会观念) like culture and religion, demonstrating that these ***social concepts*** themselves are inherently not **independent variables** (自变量) dictating social development. Rather, they exert their impact on social development as intervening variables (中间变量), shaped by the fundamental structure constituted by the social ***productive forces*** (生产力) and the relations among various social strata. Moreover, the practice of excessively appealing to the personal virtues of historical figures when seeking historical explanations—a practice that wise individuals find utterly repugnant—has now been entirely swept away.

Truthfully, what I desperately want to say is this: almost everything I have observed had already been noticed by pioneers much earlier. If the theoretical system I am about to articulate is viewed as a whole elephant, the various parts of this elephant have long been thoroughly palpated by others; however, for various reasons, no one ever explicitly pointed out that these are indeed parts of the same elephant.

Third, some might question whether subsuming the entire developmental process of humanity into a single framework is unnecessary, or even potentially dangerous. I still do not deny this.

When I was young, I read many science fiction novels imbued with an apocalyptic (启示录意味) tone, written by both Chinese and foreign authors. These novels told stories where, in the future, humanity abused genetic engineering to uniformly modify the human race in pursuit of smarter and stronger offspring. Although this project initially achieved success, the excessively homogenized human genome proved utterly defenseless against unforeseeable microbial mutations.

Although biological genetics and the human societal level are oceans apart, sociology is precisely such a discipline where no one can provide an exact proof for *any* theory, because you can fundamentally never conduct repeatable experiments. Thus, no one can definitively claim that a social system currently deemed backward or flawed won't exhibit obvious advantages under certain conditions, nor that such conditions will never arise.

But what I want to express is this: **You cannot possibly worry about the (purely potential) side effects of a prescription when administering medicine to a terminally ill patient.**

The reality facing the world we see today is that various nations' emphasis on their own "particularities" has reached a level of catastrophic destructiveness. How many regimes have existed in the past—and how many still exist today—that deceive their citizens by claiming: *"Our nation is uniquely exceptional, and we must absolutely not tread the same developmental path as those inferior nations or foreigners."*? **They use this as a pretext either to launch massive wars of aggression, or to justify their own tyrannical and abusive rule at home.**

From the 1920s to the present day, such an array of atrocities has resulted in the unnatural deaths of tens of millions across the globe. This lesson is simply too profound and too agonizing.

Unlike the ordinary citizens of developed nations—for whom memories of the Nazis have largely faded by my generation, and where the elderly who remember fascist dictatorships and aggression are few and far between—I personally currently live in exactly such an environment that relentlessly propagandizes the "uniqueness" of its civilization. And I know full well that it is not just one country generating such political propaganda. In the Third World nations across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, **"a developmental path with our nation's own characteristics"** (本国特色的发展道路) is practically a trendy catchphrase.

Must we really tolerate these lies continuing to inflict horrific damage upon human civilization solely for the sake of an illusory, or even blatantly erroneous, "fantasy of diversity" (多元化的幻想) that posits "there are millions of distinct paths to modernization for different nations"?

As I have read more and more books over the past two years, I have become increasingly convinced that the commonalities among all nations and ethnicities vastly outweigh their differences. The "differences" people perceive are fundamentally not intrinsic, biological disparities between two ethnic groups, but rather the resultant products of the distinct societies in which they live. Ambitious politicians constantly exploit this fact for propaganda, intentionally confusing ordinary citizens.

What I aim to accomplish is to fundamentally negate this exaggerated concept of distinctiveness. **No matter how brilliant or intelligent a nation is perceived to be in the public imagination, it absolutely cannot escape the fundamental theories delineated by the social sciences. Conversely, no matter how inferior or foolish a nation is perceived to be, when all social conditions are appropriate, it is entirely capable of accomplishing the monumental feats achieved by any other nation.**

By doing so, the very bedrock underlying any racist viewpoints, and any atrocities committed under the shield of "national exceptionalism" (本民族特殊论) to enact reactionary rule, will be completely pulverized.

Rational people will understand that positing universal laws for the development of human society absolutely does not equate to denying diversity or its significance. Nations like Western Europe and Japan, which successfully traversed the various historical processes to eventually achieve modernization and become developed regions, exhibit massive cultural differences among themselves, each possessing its own unique charm.

In the previous chapter, I also explicitly and frankly acknowledged that the "temporal lag" (时差) generated by the social stages of different regions can indeed possess positive significance. For example, the continuation of classical systems by the Arab and Byzantine Empires contributed monumentally to preserving the classical civilization achievements of Greece and Rome, ultimately facilitating the modernization of Europe.

At the dawn of the 20th century, humanity first left the earth and soared into the sky; barely more than half a century later, human footprints were already imprinted on the moon. I do not harbor the slightest doubt that allowing various **"nationalized social sciences"** (民族的社会科学) to run rampant, as they do today, will be a catastrophic loss for the entirety of human civilization. If extraterrestrials are currently observing Earth, they would likely laugh at us.

Just as Sir Isaac Newton revealed the fundamental architecture of the world system, thereby terminating the era of "nationalized (natural) sciences," people today should similarly strive to seek universal truths within the social sciences. What humanity should do is maintain a constant sense of reverence and caution—ensuring we do not repeat the catastrophic errors of Marx and Engels that left a legacy of disaster lasting a century—rather than abandoning the pursuit of universal truth altogether.

Ultimately, I embarked on this incredibly long journey driven by contemplation regarding the destiny of my own nation and my compatriots. Along the way, I have witnessed countless magnificent vistas. As this journey reaches a natural hiatus, I wish to refocus the lens back onto **"humanity" (人)**—even though, when studying history, people spend the vast majority of their time looking at macro-narratives of the rise and fall of empires.

I believe that if we can provide a unified narrative for the historical processes of all nations under heaven, it will, at least in the present, hold immensely positive significance for enhancing mutual understanding among the peoples of all nations, and for halting the suffering currently endured by the overwhelming majority of humanity. *(Do not forget that out of the current global population of over 8 billion, fewer than 1.5 billion live in developed nations).*

I believe there is absolutely no necessity to abandon immediate, completely visible welfare merely due to potential "side effects." Therefore, I audaciously toss out this humble brick here, in the hope of attracting jade (抛砖引玉 / *to offer a humble idea to elicit profound insights*).

Because this section is exceedingly vast and complex, readers may first consult Section 30 of this chapter, where I have provided the definitions for the concepts I will be employing.

2, Gratitude to My Pet Turtledove, "Choubao" (Stinky Baby)

The final two chapters differ fundamentally from all the preceding ones. Although the contents of Chapters 1 through 11 were discovered by me much earlier *(with some sections repositioned forward during the editing process out of logical necessity)*, they were gradually compiled and written down only in 2024. However, from this point forward until the conclusion, everything was drafted simultaneously with the original manuscript prior to any major editing.

When I decided to begin documenting this record, I had already completely abandoned the thought of pursuing a Ph.D., because my parents did not support it. In reality, this is the tragedy of a typical Chinese family. Parents do not believe their children possess independent personalities or the capacity to observe the world and draw their own conclusions. My mother would rather believe a random outsider of unknown origins, or those utterly incomprehensible short videos on her smartphone, than trust me even once. She takes immense pleasure in adopting the stance of outsiders to insult and humiliate me.

This is incredibly normalized in our nation's society. Because every member endures tremendous oppression from the society at large, they are conditioned to displace this oppression onto those they *can* oppress, deriving a sick sense of satisfaction from doing so.

Even though the directives issued within the household often contradict themselves within a 24-hour window, I am acutely aware that they see absolutely no value in pursuing a Ph.D., nor do they consider conducting academic research a respectable or meaningful profession. I cannot blame them for this. My parents, like the rest of the Chinese populace, are tragic figures. Their observation of reality is, in fact, flawless: in our society, scientific research was never a respected profession to begin with. **In this society, what commands respect first and foremost is power, followed closely by money.**

I felt profoundly helpless. If my academic excellence was sufficient to secure scholarships all the way through, it wouldn't have been entirely impossible to defy the pressure from my family and continue my studies. But evidently, I lacked that extraordinary capacity, and thus, I could only give up.

During these unfortunate and miserable years, my grandparents' pet turtledove, "Choubao" (臭宝 / Stinky Baby), provided me with immense psychological comfort.

Choubao is an Oriental Turtle Dove (山斑鸠) I rescued at the driving test center on August 2, 2022, while I was taking my driving test. He was only about ten days old at the time and had fallen out of his nest prematurely. After I picked Choubao up, he was raised as a pet in my grandparents' home as a fledgling unable to fly. We later discovered he is a male.

Although the Oriental Turtle Dove is one of the more difficult dove species to domesticate, because Choubao was raised in a human household from such a tender age, he is now completely domesticated. When people ignore him, Choubao will actively run up to us and coo. Or, when I am sleeping, he will secretly hop onto my pillow, rub his tiny head against my ear, and emit soft cooing sounds. Whenever he is petted, he twitches his wings in absolute delight.

Previously, my family had never kept a pet capable of human interaction. It wasn't until we had Choubao that I realized keeping a pet is an incredibly profoundly meaningful endeavor. Beyond providing companionship for adults, pets are especially meaningful for children.

First, **pets can teach children how to love.** Even a seven- or eight-year-old child just starting elementary school is already intellectually and physically superior to the vast majority of common pets. Unlike facing adults like their parents—where children often feel inadequate and are mostly on the receiving end of affection, finding it difficult to actively express care—young children can proactively care for their pets. This is immensely beneficial for the formation of a well-rounded, wholesome personality.

Second, **pets can teach children responsibility.** At a young age, the responsibilities children can bear are extremely limited, and the law does not consider individuals below a certain age capable of assuming behavioral responsibility. However, through interacting with pets, children can recognize what it actually feels like to shoulder responsibility, understand its significance, and reap a sense of fulfillment. This is astronomically beneficial for molding qualified citizens.

Third, **pets can teach children the concept of death.** The vast majority of pets possess short lifespans; a turtledove like Choubao can live for about ten years at most. Under current medical conditions, many elders from the grandparent generation, with whom my generation shares intimate relationships, are still alive and well by the time we reach adulthood; whereas the great-grandparent generation is often too old, resulting in emotional detachment. A pet is a companion into whom a child pours a massive amount of emotion. Even though the pet is destined to leave its little master, it can still teach them the final, most crucial lesson of life: how to perceive death. As the single most important subject in human philosophy, I believe no wise person should avoid contemplating it.

However, it is a profound pity that current Chinese families, especially urban ones, severely lack the conditions to allow children to raise pets. Whether constrained by ideology or economic limitations, raising pets is often condemned as a frivolous distraction that saps one's ambition (玩物丧志).

More importantly: **Chinese people do not know how to love, therefore they are deceitful and cruel to their compatriots. They do not understand responsibility, therefore they allow public power to run rampant and unchecked. They are apathetic toward death, therefore they do not know how a human being ought to spend their life.**

This systemic tragedy renders the act of children raising pets entirely meaningless in this environment.

Regardless of everything, Choubao is undeniably a radiant, dazzling spark of light in my life. I regard him as a miraculous gift bestowed upon me by God.

3, The Fascinating Event That Birthed These 400,000 Words

As always, I must express my profound gratitude to my friend H. Although we no longer live in the same city, he has consistently offered me enthusiastic and exceptionally acute assistance.

During the six months starting from October 2023, my friend B—whom I have known since elementary school—gradually came to understand and embrace my perspectives, as we are both currently at Xi'an Jiaotong University and have the opportunity to meet weekly. He subsequently became my right-hand man when compiling these materials. He could always offer suggestions from myriad angles I hadn't considered, granting me tremendous inspiration and fortifying my resolve to complete this marathon of a task.

Although my friend A and I have not attended the same school since graduating high school, this has in no way diminished our relationship and interactions. Over the past two years, our mutual influence has never ceased. My concepts inspired him to march steadfastly down his academic path.

Furthermore, as a Hui person (回族人), he completely discarded the various commandments of Islam and unhesitatingly defends modern life. To me, A is a role model who dares to think and dares to act. He inspired me to courageously express my views *(though in this society, one must obviously mind one's safety)* and not allow the achievements I have already made to vanish down the drain.

S and I met in junior high school. For a long time, we were merely casual friends. In early 2023, S learned from me about the definite results I had already achieved. During the summer vacation that year, S made the decision to emigrate to Canada—for the Chinese have always proclaimed, *"A gentleman does not stand under a collapsing wall"* (君子不立危墙之下). He also believed it was absolutely necessary for me to organize and expand my previously scattered notes into a complete, unified narrative. At the time, however, I consistently felt the timing was premature, as my observations regarding the rest of the world were still severely lacking.

It wasn't until the high summer of 2024, when we met on the afternoon of August 20th, that S brought this matter up again. At that moment, we were buying food at a street-side hotdog stand. Suddenly, black clouds swept in from the west. Within moments, the surroundings grew as dim as eight or nine o'clock at night. As we sat beneath a parasol waiting for our hotdogs, the distant lightning had now migrated directly directly above our heads. We chatted about our views on the current political situation, watching the world before our eyes be illuminated for a split second, only for the light to be swiftly annihilated by darkness.

Just as a torrential downpour unleashed itself, we finally received our ordered hotdogs. Fortunately, the wind was not ferocious. Thus, the two of us ate this simple dinner accompanied by the symphony of thunder, the roar of the rain, and the flashing brilliance of lightning.

Filled with profound emotion, I said to S: *"Ever since the dawn of humanity, thunderstorms have been one of the most magnificent natural phenomena our ancestors could observe. In modern Chinese, the character '奄' (Yan) originally depicted, in Oracle Bone Script, a person standing beneath a bolt of lightning. Today, it can be deconstructed into the characters '大' (great/person) and '电' (lightning).*

When the ancients saw black clouds covering the wilderness and lightning cleaving the earth, the character '奄' acquired the meaning of 'covering' and 'possessing.' Hence, we have those staggeringly heroic expressions like 'To exclusively possess the realm of Xia' (奄有区夏) or 'To entirely encompass the Four Seas' (奄有四海)!

Yet, humanity's pursuit of the direction of social development is exactly like travelers in a boundless desert trying to discern the right path—how agonizingly difficult it is! They might sink into quicksand, be plundered by bandits, be trapped by a scarcity of supplies, or become mesmerized by the mirages of false utopias. With every stretch traveled, the number of people who can reach the next oasis dwindles.

Success or failure cannot be known in a single moment, yet one must meticulously observe. Conquering vast territories does not necessarily guarantee progress, just as small states are not necessarily incapable of achieving monumental feats!"

Our conversation then drifted elsewhere, and I can no longer recall exactly what was said. By the time I finished speaking, I had already consumed one hotdog. I utilized the rainwater cascading from the edge of the parasol to wash my hands and absentmindedly scrubbed my face. S, having finished his portion, was persuaded by me to wash up in the same manner. Evidently, we were both immensely satisfied with this primal experience.

We sat in silence for about ten minutes. The wind drove the darkness eastward; the clouds dissipated, and the rain ceased. The enduring brilliance of the sun replaced the ephemeral flashes of lightning, and the chirping of birds replaced the roar of thunder.

We sat and chatted for another half hour. I then escorted S to the subway station, and he took the high-speed rail back to Beijing.

In truth, even up to the end of that conversation, I never explicitly stated that I would write these matters down. But deep within the recesses of my heart, I had already made the decision.

The strength of any single individual is inevitably limited. **Yet, I am determined to light a candle, to finally behold the full panorama of this elephant that has hidden in the darkness for thousands of years.** Today, what I can achieve is nothing more than the flickering illumination of a candle in the night (炳烛之明); but the day will come when radiant light shall bathe the entire world.!

4, Early States Before The Great Expansion

I believe there is not much need to heavily supplement the process of the first historic leap: the transition from a **pre-state society** (前国家社会) to an ***early state*** (早期国家).

The only thing that warrants attention is that the specific state of the local society at the exact moment this transition occurs is not absolute; rather, it is possible within a certain spectrum. For instance, whether the society remains completely patriarchal or whether massive remnants of a

matriarchal society still survive; whether a relatively complex social division of labor has already emerged or remains ambiguous; and the exact degree of class differentiation.

For civilized societies that enter the ***early state*** independently (rather than under external influence)—which naturally implies they belong to the earliest batch of civilizations to form—they should already be in a state characterized by patriarchy, a complex social division of labor, and distinct class differentiation on the very eve of this mutation.

Conversely, under the influence of external civilizations, particularly driven by commercial trade, backward pre-state regions might complete this transition much earlier and at a faster pace. A small minority could rapidly amass wealth through commercial activities to become the dominant class. When their ***early state*** forms, the local social division of labor might still be relatively rudimentary, and even massive traditions of a matriarchal society might be preserved.

However, there is another highly crucial scenario where backward peoples advancing from a **pre-state society** into civilization do not need to pass through a "substantial" ***early state*** phase. *(An **early state** here refers to a state where the primary mode of exploitation is the direct expropriation of labor via forced labor, where political power is distributed based on blood ties, and where royal and divine power are tightly intertwined—what we term here a slavery regime).*

This scenario occurs when ***barbarians*** (蛮族) on the periphery of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) rapidly elevate their ***productive forces*** (生产力) and civilizational levels through their interactions with the empire. During their inward migration amidst the empire's declining era, they develop to the point of being capable of establishing ***feudal relations of production***. **These backward peoples, upon "*Entering the Pass*" (*Ru Guan* / 入关), will catapult directly into the early stages of a *feudal society* in a very short timeframe, entirely bypassing the two stages of the *early state* and the *classical empire*!**

Additionally, some peoples mastered the skills of metal smelting (bronze, or even later, iron) prior to their formation of a state—for example, the Indo-Europeans roaming the Eurasian landmass. In this case, the historical trajectory diverges somewhat, which will be addressed later.

Obviously, this transition does not *always* occur. **Pre-state societies** were still situated in the Stone Age; their capacity to transform nature and to resist natural fluctuations was exceedingly frail. Due to environmental shifts, many early cultures or civilizations perished. Even a highly mature and prosperous primary civilization like the Indus Valley Civilization could not escape this fate *(though it remains unconfirmed whether the Indus Valley Civilization had already entered a state formation).*

Once social production yields a stable ***surplus of social production*** (社会生产剩余), as long as this process remains uninterrupted and persists for a sufficient duration, the transition toward an ***early state*** is bound to happen inevitably.

I find it deeply ironic that although human societies of that era were easily destroyed by nature, they were profoundly difficult to be *self-destroyed*! *(Here, "self-destruction" refers to independently prohibiting the possibility of further development, just as the Chinese Empire did; it does not include being eradicated by invading human groups).*

This is because the meager ***productive forces*** back then were fundamentally insufficient to generate any complex social structure capable of acting like the later, phenomenally destructive bureaucratic systems—systems that rendered it almost impossible for the s***ocial surplus*** to receive any effective investment, and even deployed coercive political power to exterminate any nascent sprouts of change. Even if the magnitude of investment in technology was minuscule, as long as the number of attempts was high enough, probabilistically speaking, the formation of an ***early state*** was a 100% certainty. After all, compared to the pre-state period, ***early states*** required no utterly insurmountable technologies; they could both comfortably exist within the Stone Age.

I contend that the evolution from a **pre-state society** to an ***early state*** should trace a relatively lucid trajectory: *Absence of class differentiation → Emergence of private ownership → Emergence of class differentiation → Formation of the **early state**.*

There exists no special transitional stage—such as a ***classical period*** or an ***early modern society*** (近世社会)—in between. After all, in the transition from a classless society to a class-based state, let alone lacking any alternation of ruling classes viewed as a macroscopic whole, there are barely even any finely-divided political elite cliques. It is genuinely impossible to imagine under what circumstances a balance could be struck to benefit the monarch *(though at that time, "chieftain" seems a vastly more appropriate title).*

After developing a city-state morphology, individual city-states would indeed occasionally annex numerous surrounding city-states to forge a large kingdom, or even, like Egypt, maintain long-term unification. However, these kingdoms could only sustain stable rule within a tiny minority of intact *(and tightly interconnected)* geographical units—regions characterized by monolithic language, script, and culture. **Their territorial expanse fundamentally could not be compared to that of a *typical classical empire*.**

The only entity that might provoke skepticism is the emergence of the Inca Empire (印加帝国) in the Andean region. This regime possessed an exceptionally vast territory; in terms of geographical span, it was staggeringly massive. Its population even reached the ten-million mark, encompassing over a hundred distinct languages, and it was hyper-centralized. Judging by these characteristics, the Inca Empire undeniably far surpassed ordinary ***early states***, even rivaling ***typical classical empires***.

Yet, from another perspective, this so-called empire seemed far more backward than many ***early states***. It was stuck in the Stone Age; it possessed no writing system and no currency; commercial circulation was virtually nonexistent; and the state completely monopolized the distribution of social resources. In these aspects, it conspicuously exhibited the characteristics of a much more primitive clan society.

The rise of this regime is indeed difficult for me to comprehend. After all, strictly speaking, directly opposite China *(if one drills straight through the Earth)* is Argentina; Peru and Bolivia are simply too distant from me. Their domesticated crops and animals were completely alien, and a civilization thriving on high-altitude plateaus is excessively unfamiliar to my scope of expertise.

However, from another angle, it must be pointed out that while the Inca state existed for several centuries, the period during which it rapidly ballooned was actually exceedingly brief. Its tenure as the empire stretching 4,000 kilometers seen on modern historical maps lasted mere decades. *Did it truly establish a political system capable of long-term sustainable execution?*

Empirically, effectively altering the consciousness of a nation requires roughly two to three generations. This means that if one or two generations of Inca monarchs could function as leaders with **Charismatic authority** (卡里斯玛式领袖), coupled with certain serendipitous favorable factors *(this is hard to pinpoint—it could be climate shifts, agricultural leaps, or severe internal crises among neighboring states)* and intense military mobilization, they could achieve astonishing military victories in a very short timeframe. Provided they committed no fatal political blunders, it is entirely possible for the regime to sustain itself for a period purely on sheer inertia.

However, what would happen if given a bit more time is highly unpredictable. For instance, the Inca monarch Huayna Capac (瓦伊纳卡帕克), during the empire's absolute zenith, had already made the decision to partition the empire upon his death. Furthermore, even the Spaniards—despite possessing a technological superiority of several generational gaps—heavily exploited the Inca civil war to conquer the nation.

Therefore, one absolutely cannot rule out the possibility that even if this empire had never encountered the Spaniards, it might not have survived for many more years anyway. **Rather than saying the Spanish invasion destroyed the Inca Empire, it is vastly more accurate to say the Spanish invasion destroyed the original Andean society.** Given this context, while the events that transpired in the Inca civilization are bizarre and definitely provoke skepticism, they cannot serve as a potent counterexample to the general rule.

The most ancient batch of **primary civilizations** (原生文明) was born within tropical (or subtropical) climates, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley Civilization. These civilizations relied on major rivers flowing through their lands to irrigate the fertile fields along the

banks; yet, moving just slightly away from the rivers, the landscape immediately transitioned into barren deserts.

In the very beginning, this geographical layout was immensely hospitable to civilization: abundant water resources, prolonged sunlight, high crop yields per acre, and people were spared from the torment of severe cold. This implies that under identical agricultural technological conditions, these regions generated the highest ***social surplus*** (社会剩余). It is obviously no surprise that they were the first to march toward the stage of ***early states***.

Among the **primary civilizations** across the Eurasian landmass, China appears exceptionally unique. Although our civilization evidently emerged later than Mesopotamia and Egypt—roughly contemporaneous with the Indus Valley—it was absolutely not characterized by their *"rivers besieged by deserts"* paradigm. This holds true both for Northern China, which subsequently dominated the mainstream, and for Southern China, which integrated as a tributary.

The primary early crops in Northern China were foxtail millet (粟) and broomcorn millet (黍), both suited for dryland farming. As the staple grains of the northern populace, they sustained civilization through the vast majority of its early epochs. *(The introduction of wheat into China roughly coincided with the dawn of our civilizational history, but it didn't become the primary staple of the North until after the Anno Domini era).*

Another highly probable reason why early Chinese people favored dryland crops was the roaring, catastrophic floods in the North—which is also a shared historical memory across humanity. Not only do historical texts teem with mythological legends of combating the Great Flood, but prehistoric archaeology in China also demonstrates that our nation was severely impacted. Across the entire North China Plain (华北平原)—specifically the regions vulnerable to the "strikes" of the lower Yellow River—there exists a glaring vacuum of prehistoric cultural sites, whereas the surrounding perimeter is densely packed with them.

Whether it was a conscious choice or not for northern residents to farm and dwell on higher elevations, this choice was obviously proven to be phenomenally successful in the end. Because the civilization in the South, primarily cultivating rice *(Chinese scholars have persistently attempted to define Liangzhu [良渚] as a state, as this serves to push China's civilizational history even further back; but I personally find this endeavor lacking in meaning, as everyone knows the Northern civilization ultimately became the mainstream of Chinese civilization)*, was evidently severely devastated by the relentless blows of floods and marine transgressions (海侵).

Regardless, **China's primary civilization was evidently born into a geographical location vastly more "open" compared to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley civilizations.**

After the birth of its ***early states***, there existed no insurmountable, "no man's land"-esque barriers nearby. Instead, there were contiguous expanses of regions with similar climates and environments. This dictates that China's ***early states*** were inevitably forced into far more frequent and *"intense"* interactions with surrounding tribes and even other ***early states***. *(I use quotation marks here because these interactions were not exclusively warfare; they could also be commerce or other behaviors).*

We shall soon see how exactly this specific "uniqueness" became **the initial perturbation (**第一次扰动**) that drove China to derail from the normal developmental trajectory of human society**, and exactly how this mechanism exerted its devastating effect.

5, The Great Expansion Altered the Global Paradigm of Human Civilization

When commenting on early civilizations, people often remark, *"The price of prematurity is premature decay" (*早熟的代价就是早衰*)*. This does not mean that human society undergoes a biological process analogous to human bodies that can be strictly defined as "aging." Rather, it implies that prematurely entering a certain developmental stage might necessitate an excessively protracted wait for the next decisive revolution *(such as a critical breakthrough in technology)*. This prolonged waiting period inevitably breeds a multitude of uncertain and certain destructive factors.

The former includes drastic climatic shifts and violent natural disasters—factors entirely beyond human control. As long as the observation timeframe is sufficiently long, the probability of these events occurring approaches exactly 1. The latter encompasses phenomena that inevitably arise due to human activities: the rise of neighboring tribes, the degradation of agricultural conditions, and the exhaustion of natural resources.

A civilized state cannot possibly expect its peripheries to forever remain inhabited by stagnant, un-progressing ***barbarians***, nor can it expect its productive activities to never pose a threat to the natural environment. Therefore, entering a certain stage prematurely, ahead of all other regions, inherently means the probability of that civilization being terminated *before* reaching the next stage is astronomically higher.

For the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, the great rivers amidst the deserts were indeed a comfortable cradle. But once the era shifted, this relatively closed environment rapidly mutated into a cage. It is akin to a fundamental truth: **An infant cannot remain in a cradle for an entire lifetime.**

The decisive technological revolution occurred in tools. Precisely speaking, the emergence and maturation of metal smelting technology enabled the manufacture and universalization of bronze and iron tools. **This process eternally altered the face of the human world.**

Prior to this, humanity's capacity to transform nature was exceedingly finite. The civilized world existed merely as isolated pockets in a few regions boasting superior and stable agricultural conditions, entirely segregated by vast wildernesses. Following this revolution, civilization rapidly conquered those savage hinterlands. New cities and states were erected in newly developed territories. This phenomenon occurred universally across the Eurasian landmass, and those ethnic groups that seized the initiative during this revolution would later become renowned across the globe as the glorious architects of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国).

As for the specific forms these revolutionary tools and technologies took when applied in different regions, and the exact modalities through which the "Great Conquest" of the final millennium BC unfolded... *(Of course, this is not to say* ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) *only commenced in 1000 BC. Long before that, the Shang Dynasty in China had already undertaken massive expansions, the Mycenaeans [迈锡尼人] had established colonies in Anatolia, and the Aryans [雅利安人] had begun their migrations. However, it was during the final millennium BC that this process became phenomenally conspicuous).*

This process inevitably diverged because people made adaptations tailored to their specific geographical environments (因地制宜).

In the Indian subcontinent, the paramount mission for the invading Aryans was the eradication of the forests. For members of a civilization living in the tropics, battling the jungle was indeed a crucial component of ancient life. Surviving texts describe this process with vivid imagination. For example, the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (百道梵书) claims that Agni (阿耆尼), the god of fire, incinerated the dense forests of the Ganges River basin, thereby enabling the Aryans to inhabit the area.

In antiquity, an absolutely critical task before reclaiming wasteland was setting fires. First, to burn away the surface vegetation; second, to utilize metal agricultural tools to eradicate the seeds of plants detrimental to agriculture that might still survive in the soil. For regions with terrifyingly dense vegetation, fire was even more indispensable. The early Mahajanapadas (早期列国 / the great realms) in India still operated as massive ***communities*** (社群), ruled by clans, and only began transitioning toward monarchies in the 6th century BC. Because the region possesses a tropical monsoon climate, the capacity of the government was severely shackled by the natural environment; forests and mountainous terrains were chronically ungovernable. Therefore, the ***community*** would persist as a fundamental unit of political life in India for a remarkably long time.

For another branch of Aryans who migrated into Iran, their paramount mission was battling water scarcity and resolving the irrigation problem on the Iranian plateau. During the final millennium BC, technological advancements yielded magnificent achievements, most notably the *Qanat*

systems (坎儿井). This allowed civilization to shatter its confinement to Elam in southwestern Iran and proliferate across the entire Iranian plateau.

During the reign of the Achaemenid Empire, imperial rulers actively encouraged the construction and maintenance of Qanats. Needless to say, constructing such colossal hydraulic engineering projects would have been utterly unimaginable without sophisticated metal tools. The new regimes established by the Aryans in Iran were monarchies. At that time, regimes across ***the Near East*** were universally monarchical. Whether driven by the necessity to compete with rival regimes or the imperative to organize massive engineering construction, the choice of monarchy was obviously an inevitability.

For the Greeks and Phoenicians (腓尼基人) dwelling along the coasts of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, the most critical technology for colonial expansion was undoubtedly navigation. Benefiting from advancements in maritime technology, the Greeks and Phoenicians established a vast network of colonies along the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Many remain renowned to this day, such as Tripoli (的黎波里) and Marseille (马赛).

Some of these would subsequently evolve into regional hegemons, such as Carthage (迦太基). Others would eventually become the capitals of empires, such as Byzantium. These colonial cities were heavily influenced by their mother states and adopted certain city-state political forms prevalent on the Greek peninsula. They might also experience institutional mutations similar to those in the Greek homeland. Overall, however, compared to ***the Great Expansion*****s** occurring in other regions during the same period, the democratic elements here were consistently more abundant.

In China, the challenges our ancestors faced during their expansion were highly diverse: when slash-and-burn clearing was needed, they burned the wilderness; in waterlogged regions, they drained the lands; and when water was scarce, they dammed rivers for irrigation.

Although during ***Late Imperial China*** (晚期中华帝国), the connotation of "water conservancy" (水利) had mutated into *"benefiting the monarch while devastating the myriad people,"* in China's foundational stage, these hydraulic engineering projects were undeniably worthy of immense praise and indeed achieved extraordinary feats.

Unlike the aforementioned three regions, China—as a **primary civilization** (原生文明)—forged a monarchical state with commanding superiority in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River very early on, following prolonged confrontations and amalgamations among various *Fangguo* (方国 / early chiefdoms or proto-states). Even if it remains unclear which specific

archaeological site the Xia Dynasty (夏朝) corresponds to, or whether it has been discovered at all, the existence of the Shang Dynasty (商朝) is glaringly obvious and beyond any doubt.

Judging by textual and archaeological data, the Shang Dynasty unequivocally established an overwhelming superiority over peripheral regimes in Northern China, truly living up to its self-designation as the "Great Settlement Shang" (大邑商). Furthermore, it was genuinely expanding right up until the eve of its demise. *(To be honest, people today only possess a relatively clear understanding of the mid-to-late history of the Shang Dynasty; after all, mature writing did not exist the moment the Shang was established. But at least during the periods we do understand, the military campaigns of the Shang kings were absolutely ceaseless).*

The Zhou Dynasty (周朝), which superseded the Shang, adopted a strategy that history proved to be phenomenally successful. Bolstered by the patriarchal clan system (血缘宗法制), it dispatched royal family members and trusted aristocrats to conduct eastward colonization activities. They established vassal states (诸侯国) one after another, which fiercely anchored themselves within fortified cities surrounded by "***barbarians***."

This behavior exhibited one exceptionally distinct characteristic: For two and a half centuries, the Zhou royal court basically maintained leadership over these expansionist activities and successfully controlled the vassals it had "enfeoffed" (分封). *(I use quotation marks here because the territories these vassals eventually possessed originally did not belong to the Son of Heaven at all).*

This massive expansion—conducted under the centralized command of a supreme regime—ensured that even after the Zhou Emperor lost real power, the increasingly independent regimes across the vast network conquered by the Western Zhou still maintained a remarkably high degree of shared cultural identity.

Furthermore, because the history from the birth of China's ***early states*** (早期国家) to the late stage of ***The Great Expansion*** (the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods) was excessively protracted—spanning between 15 to 20 centuries—the dominant regimes *(namely, those later deemed orthodox: Xia, Shang, and Zhou)* were able to continuously expand their sphere of rule. *(Though in eras predating the late Shang, it is difficult to definitively assert that administrative expansion occurred based solely on the cultural uniformity of unearthed artifacts; it might merely have been shifts in spheres of influence caused by dependency and alliances).* Consequently, the tribal forces in Northern China were severely and systematically pulverized.

This is where the situation becomes fascinating. Although China was born as a **primary civilization**—and emerged relatively late compared to its peers—those peers were left behind by

the era. Yet, in the massive colonial expansions preceding the ***classical era***, China found itself competing on the exact same stage as a group of "junior" secondary civilizations, and its seniority was actually the oldest among them.

"*The Great Expansion*" is a monumental watershed in human civilization. Those ancient civilizations—whose histories were considered profoundly ancient even back then—inevitably marched toward decay as long as they failed to participate in this specific historical process.

For the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia, the deserts that once besieged their rivers had now mutated into cages restricting them. Acquiring mineral resources was exceedingly difficult, and due to the scarcity of vegetation, even securing fuel for large-scale metal smelting became a severe crisis. Although the former territories of these Old World veterans eventually became parts of new empires *(though the Indus Valley Civilization simply vanished on its own)*, one clearly cannot attribute this failure merely to foreign invasions.

This is evident because the plight of their peers in the New World was obviously even bleaker. The Americas lacked many domesticated animals useful to humans, and metal tools were only used sporadically. For the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico and the Maya, the moment environmental shifts exceeded their highly limited regulatory capacities, unsolvable societal crises erupted.

Whether it was the collapse of "Classic Teotihuacan" or the "Classic Maya"—*(I use quotation marks to emphasize that pre-Columbian America was relatively primitive, and the academic nomenclature here operates on a different standard than Old World civilizations; "Classic Maya" here absolutely does not refer to the **classical empire** stage of Mayan civilization. Although the end of the Mayan Classic period also featured urban decay and the construction of heavily fortified new cities—which are characteristic of **Late Antiquity*** (古典时代晚期)*—the post-Classic Mayan period was obviously light-years away from **feudalization**)*—their declines are exceedingly difficult to explain as the result of invasions by powerful external enemies. In the ancient regions of Mexico and Mesoamerica—civilizational zones far more isolated than the Old World—there probably weren't that many covetous predators eyeing them anyway.

The ethnic groups that successfully executed this expansion would go on to establish a batch of the most prestigious ***classical empires*** in human history, empires whose glory is still deeply reminisced by descendants thousands of years later.

This transformation was by no means accidental. People can comprehend this through three specific dimensions.

6, The Monumental Significance of The Great Expansion in the Formation of Classical Empires

First, ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) shielded society from plunging into the **Malthusian Trap** (马尔萨斯陷阱), ensuring the steady growth of ***labor productivity*** (劳动生产率). This was its most paramount economic contribution.

Before metal tools were widely utilized, the inhabitants of the civilized world were akin to being stranded on isolated islands amidst a boundless ocean. The city-states capable of stably providing various surplus products remained phenomenally static for millennia. The boundaries of their "*fertile fields and beautiful ponds*" (良田美池) were perceived by generation after generation as immutably fixed.

This is not to say that prior to ***the Great Expansion***, early civilizations possessed absolutely zero capacity to transform nature and expand agricultural land; the ancient Egyptians were constantly attempting to develop the **Faiyum Oasis** (法尤姆绿洲). But such development clearly amounted to mere piecemeal tinkering on the fringes of their original geographical units. It neither altered the geopolitical paradigm facing their civilization, nor was it sufficient to effectively relieve demographic pressure.

Both Mesopotamia and Egypt endured more than one catastrophically destructive societal crisis long before losing their independence in the final epoch before the Common Era—such as the First Intermediate Period of Egypt. As for Mesopotamia, its agricultural economic conditions had already severely degraded during the late Sumerian period, plagued by atrocious **soil salinization** (土地盐碱化). An even more tragic case is the Indus Valley Civilization, which completely vanished even before the Aryans arrived; its cities were abandoned, highly likely due to severe environmental degradation.

The inhabitants of these "isolated islands" were not entirely unable to flee. They naturally had the opportunity to defect and join the surrounding tribes, but doing so would mean they were no longer regarded as members of the civilized world.

As Thomas Malthus asserted, until the advent of modern science and the onset of the Industrial Revolution, technological progress occurred only sporadically; the ***productive forces*** fundamentally would not experience the kind of explosive growth witnessed over the past two-plus centuries. Yet, given sufficient resources, populations will inevitably grow exponentially. **This signifies that any sporadic improvement in *productive forces* will inevitably be neutralized by population growth.** Society thus plunges into a state characterized in recent years as **"involution" (**内卷**)**: ***labor productivity*** fundamentally cannot increase substantially, the living standards of societal members see no improvement, and sometimes they even deteriorate further.

The Great Expansion **terminated this existential peril for several centuries.**

For those ethnic groups that participated in this historical process, the moment the society generated surplus population, or when regional agricultural crises erupted due to climate shifts, this "surplus population" could seek survival by migrating far away to pioneer new frontiers of the civilized world. Advancements in social production were no longer neutralized by population growth. After all, as long as they had a choice, what reason would people who had tasted a better life have to return to more miserable conditions?

In fact, if one notes how the ancient Greeks used to cast lots among families with multiple sons to send one son away to a colony, it is effortless to grasp the monumental significance of ***the Great Expansion*** in relieving demographic pressure. During this specific era, population growth was actually an immense blessing. The size of the population perfectly dictated the sheer magnitude of the territories they could pioneer, without the slightest fear of diminishing agricultural returns or plummeting living standards.

The population mobility and explosive demographic growth brought about by this expansion—coupled with the collisions and exchanges among ethnic groups and the discovery of new resource origins—all possessed the potential to violently stimulate commercial activities, making them phenomenally prosperous. Moreover, they provided an immensely positive impetus for technological innovation.

It was precisely this slow yet persistently steady growth in *labor productivity* during the centuries preceding the establishment of *classical empires* (古典帝国) **that laid the bedrock for classical prosperity.** The immense accumulation of social wealth created vastly more **non-productive intellectuals** (脱产知识分子) than existed prior to the expansion. This catalyzed a massive eruption of revolutionary new philosophies, new sciences, and new technologies, forging the indispensable prerequisites for the formation of vastly more complex state apparatuses.

This rapid expansionary process, however, did not continue indefinitely. From the moment ***classical empires*** expanded to their maximum frontiers until the dawn of the ***High Middle Ages*** *(in my narrative, I equate the* ***Middle Ages*** *with the* ***feudal period****, and the* ***High Middle Ages*** *with the* ***mid-feudalization stage****)*, although land reclamation never entirely ceased during these centuries, its efficiency fundamentally could not rival the expansion during the formative period of ***classical society*** (古典社会). This was due to the rapid development of a ***natural economy*** (自然经济) and the deliberate weakening of centralized political organizational capacity *(which, naturally, was absolutely not a bad thing).*

Demographic fluctuations *(which inherently reflect the total acreage of cultivated land behind that population)* amply demonstrate this reality. Between 150 AD and 1000 AD, whether in Europe undergoing normal ***feudalization*** (封建化) or in China, which ultimately completed its

bureaucratic restoration *(let us ignore the tragic, catastrophic troughs in China's population curve and solely consider the peaks)*, population growth was exceedingly sluggish—glaringly slower than during the final few centuries BC. *(From the Western Zhou Dynasty to the dawn of the Common Era, China's population likely tripled).*

Japan exhibited the exact same pattern. Compared to the rapid population growth from the **Yayoi period** (弥生时代) to the **Nara period** (奈良时代), population growth from the Heian period to the early **Sengoku period** (战国时代) was monumentally slower.

As Europe ushered in the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期) in the 11th century, another massive wave of land reclamation and population growth commenced. Japan's population similarly experienced a massive surge at the dawn of the Edo period *(which to a certain extent proves that Japan's* ***feudalization*** *process lagged temporally behind Europe's).* However, I will not delve into that discussion here.

Second, ***The Great Expansion*** violently impacted antiquated ***social consciousness***. Within a protracted era of constant transformation, novel ideas and concepts gradually materialized. This constitutes its most paramount ideological contribution.

By the year 1000 BC, the history of human civilization was already immensely ancient. Back then, when the inhabitants of Egypt gazed upon the monuments of **Giza** (吉萨), or when the inhabitants of Mesopotamia looked at the crumbling ruins of **Ur** (乌尔), it was exceedingly difficult for them to possess any lucid historical memory regarding the epoch when these structures were actually built. For thousands of years, the paramount characteristic of the world people observed was enduring stagnation. A constellation of city-states dotted the civilizational map; occasionally, a formidable monarch would expand his territory to forge a kingdom, which would inevitably decay after a few generations.

There existed a few mercantile city-states along the western seaboards; agricultural production in Anatolia was notoriously unstable; and roaming the lands further east, north, and south were ephemeral nomads. Only Egypt stood as a long-lasting, unified nation-state, yet the fundamental social morphology of this regime remained highly rigid since its initial unification. Whether it was Asiatic invaders or the pharaoh who worshipped **Aten** (阿吞), all eventually faded into the dust of bygone eras. In Egypt, it seemed as though one dynasty was eternally followed by merely another dynasty; in Mesopotamia, royal authority merely seemed to perpetually transfer from one city-state to another.

The profound transformation brought about by ***The Great Expansion*** was not merely that people—having witnessed a vast new world—began to doubt the antiquated, stagnant dogmas and actively

sought new interpretations of the world. More crucially, following victorious conquests over indigenous populations and massive geographical engineering of the environment, these conquerors began to contemplate and readjust their relationships with other entities—whether that be other humans, Nature, or elusive deities.

The unceasing victories in reality unequivocally served as a colossal psychological boost for the entire ethnic group. Therefore, in the final millennium BC, the peoples who partook in ***The Great Expansion*** universally grew far more confident. This newfound confidence was reflected in every conceivable facet of ideology and social behavior.

Deities began to transition from unpredictable, draconian, and punitive figures into relatively benign entities that could be approached and comprehended through certain means. From the Shang Dynasty to the Zhou Dynasty, the supreme deity worshipped by the Chinese underwent exactly this metamorphosis. Allegedly, the God of Judaism experienced a similar evolution: from the *Old Testament* (旧约) to the *New Testament* (新约), the image of God became phenomenally more compassionate. In the eyes of the Aryans in India, the gods were their primary vanguard in conquering the subcontinent.

The nature of divine sacrifices also underwent a radical transformation: practices that could potentially sabotage social production were drastically curtailed. In China, from whatever angle one examines it, there is a glaring distinction between the sacrifices of the Shang Dynasty and those of the Zhou Dynasty; from a modern perspective, the latter was undeniably more civilized. *(This can be effortlessly understood through logic: Before **the Great Expansion**, overpopulation was an inevitable trend. Human sacrifice, though utterly brutal, possessed a twisted underlying rationale. During the era of **the Great Expansion**, however, a surplus of manpower was virtually impossible; more labor directly equated to more wealth and greater power. Thus, the reformation of sacrificial rites was an absolute inevitability).*

In India, revulsion toward the convoluted, massive sacrifices of Brahmanism directly catalyzed the rise and dissemination of Buddhism and Jainism. In ***the Near East***, Jewish devotees seeking atonement before God were required to offer substantial sacrifices; however, after Jesus allegedly bore immense suffering on behalf of humanity, Christians were no longer required to pay such exorbitant prices.

People believed in their own capacities and the efficacy of their choices more than in any previous epoch.

Zoroaster (琐罗亚斯德 / also translated as Zarathustra) emphasized human free will, insisting that people should exercise their own intellect and judgment to execute actions for which they are responsible, thereby driving the world toward an order of goodness.

The Greeks went the furthest. Achieving spectacular triumphs in philosophy, mathematics, and natural science, they believed humans possessed the capability to cognitively conquer the universe—and they succeeded astoundingly.

In China, regardless of the divergent doctrines championed by the Hundred Schools of Thought (诸子百家), the era where the Shang people trembled helplessly before *Shangdi* (上帝 / the Supreme Diety in ancient Chinese texts, not to be conflated with the Christian God) was entirely eradicated. When navigating relationships between humans and Nature, deities, or other peoples, the most conservative factions argued that letting Nature take its course would still yield a perfectly decent life. Meanwhile, the most radical factions were already roaring: *"Master the Mandate of Heaven and exploit it!"* (制天命而用之).

In summary, society adopted a phenomenally more proactive posture in embracing transformation across all dimensions.

This very metamorphosis would subsequently sculpt some of the most crucial—and to this day, profoundly nostalgic—characteristics of ***classical empires***: *A spirit unconstrained by antiquated systems and daring to pioneer the world; an open and inclusive social ethos; the explosive rise of academies and schools of thought; a torrent of academic achievements; a volcanic eruption of new cultural and artistic forms; massive leaps in science and technology; and the widespread dissemination of rationalism.*

They glorified and illuminated the *classical empires*, forging a heroic age of triumph and glory!

Of course, once the expansion of the ***classical states*** reached its absolute limits and ***feudalization*** commenced, ***social consciousness*** rapidly pivoted in an entirely different direction, which I will discuss shortly.

Third, ***The Great Expansion*** shook the antiquated social structures to their core, challenging the status of humanity's earliest batch of rulers—the aristocrats, priests, and monarchs who had evolved from clan chieftains, shamans, and war leaders.

This is patently obvious: ***The Great Expansion*** entailed massive population migrations, the conquest of vast territories, and the erection of new cities. Prior to the ***modern era***, it was fundamentally impossible for any regime to effectively control population mobility on such a colossal scale and scope. The population mobility during this period proportionately exceeded even that of the later colonial era *(after all, the total population was much smaller back then, but establishing permanent settlements likely required more raw manpower because the technological level during **the Great Expansion** was far more backward).* This was especially true for highly mobile ethnic groups like the Aryans. Historically speaking, the political phenomenon of ***The Great***

Expansion was decentralized; there was no unified state will to command the entire ethnic group to pioneer specific regions. The various political entities within cultural ***communities*** sharing a common ancestral myth [拥有共同祖先神话的文化共同体] conducted expansion attempts relatively independently, competed with one another, and conquered whatever regions they could to aggrandize themselves.

Even in China—where the Zhou Dynasty possessed a massive population base and even a relatively mature administrative system—the Huaxia Order (华夏秩序) spearheaded by the Zhou Emperor completely disintegrated by the 8th century BC. In that era, an unpopular person or faction within one city-state could easily flee into exile in another region and continue to propagate and implement their doctrines.

Nations with divergent political orientations competed fiercely, forging alliances and counter-alliances (合纵连横). For a remarkably long duration, no single regime was capable of subjugating its peripheral neighbors, resulting in the formation of a highly pluralistic geopolitical paradigm.

The power of the old-guard rulers was systematically eroded during this process; the only variable was the specific manifestation of their decline presented to the world. In Greece, monarchs were highly likely to be directly overthrown, leading to the establishment of republics or aristocracies. In China, usurpations where "minor lineage branches replaced major lineage branches" (小宗取代大宗) and "ministers usurped their sovereigns" (卿士取代国君) occurred repeatedly.

The loosening of the old order triggered mutations across the entire social structure. The power of conservative factions—or, to put it more bluntly, reactionary factions—was massively crippled. They no longer possessed the capacity to stifle the emergence of novel elements. In India, the rigid caste stipulations of the Vedic period began to falter once the ***classical era*** commenced; a person's status became increasingly dependent on their secular achievements rather than their caste.

And as we shall soon see, when ***classical empires*** were eventually established, monarchs—driven by their own self-interest during the initial stages of ***feudalization***—would invariably lean toward supporting the newly emerging minor landlords and rich peasants, cultivating them to suppress the old aristocracy. **This sequence of changes forged the fundamental political prerequisites for *feudalization*.**

Why must we place such immense emphasis on the destruction of original political structures caused by ***the Great Expansion***?

The reason lies here: Out of the two monumental macro-stage transitions human society has experienced to date, the transition from a ***slavery society*** to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) is vastly different from the transition from a ***feudal society*** to a ***capitalist society***.

Even ignoring the much later completion of the Industrial Revolution, simply by observing the *onset* of the Industrial Revolution, anyone would be astounded by the explosive growth of Britain's fiscal revenues in the 18th century. This means that when a ***feudal society*** transitions into a ***capitalist society***, the capitalist system exhibits colossal superiority from the very beginning. Today, it is easy to notice that nations where the bourgeoisie was strongest and first established bourgeois democratic regimes (like the Netherlands and Britain) rapidly achieved dominance in global competition, projecting national power utterly disproportionate to their territory and population size.

Logically, this is not difficult to comprehend. After all, the vigorous development of capitalist elements directly equates to vibrant economic activity. As long as the state does not perceive this mutation as a threat or find itself utterly incapable of utilizing it *(a difficulty that ceases to exist once the bourgeoisie seizes power)*, economic development yields nothing but absolute benefits. The augmentation of fiscal revenues enters a virtuous cycle, and the ensuing surge in national power is entirely unsurprising. As for the immense advantages brought by modern scientific and technological innovations, they merely give wings to tigers (如虎添翼) for nations that seized the initiative in social development.

However, the process of advancing from an *early state*, through a *classical empire*, and finally reaching the feudal stage is entirely diametrically opposed!

In its initial stages, ***feudalization*** inherently signifies the establishment of the dominance of a ***natural economy*** (自然经济), the decay of cities and commercial activities, a social ethos growing increasingly conservative, and the frequent eruption of civil wars and foreign invasions. As I have mentioned numerous times previously, this process was initially intensely anxiety-inducing and terrifying for the people living through it—just like the people in the late Heian period (平安后期) muttering all day long that the "Age of Dharma Decline" (末法时代 / Mappō) had arrived. Yet Japan's situation was already remarkably fortunate; after all, it suffered no foreign invasions. No matter how the samurai marched on Kyoto (上洛), they were still Japanese.

Consistent with people's pessimism, ***early feudal states*** indeed did not necessarily possess any advantage over ***classical empires*** in terms of overall national power *(especially regarding the most intuitive metric: military strength).* From ***Late Antiquity*** (晚期古典时期) to the dawn of the ***High Middle Ages***, technological progress was exceedingly limited. The organizational capacity of these regimes had not yet recovered to classical levels, and their metrics regarding territorial expanse, population, and fiscal revenue were phenomenally inferior to the past.

It is precisely this superficial "decay" during the collapse of *classical empires* that forged the most severe and enduring ideological illusion in human history. It buried fundamental historical truths beneath the dust of time. Yet, if we merely brush away the surface layer of dust, we will discover that the evidence is absolutely ubiquitous. **Puncturing this grand illusion is one of the primary reasons I am writing these words.**

Therefore, the transition from a ***feudal society*** to a ***capitalist society*** is infinitely easier than the transition from an ***early state*** (早期国家) to a ***feudal society***. As long as a nation's bourgeoisie can emerge onto the political stage independently *(rather than under external influence or subjugated by a bureaucratic system)*, modernization is merely a matter of time.

Conversely, the arduous obstacles and profound uncertainties involved in evolving from a ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) into ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) firmly controlling the state are staggeringly immense. We observe that the overwhelming majority of nations utterly failed to smoothly traverse this stage *(in fact, prior to intense Western influence, only Japan managed to do so outside of Western Europe).* Some progressed agonizingly slowly, some stagnated for millennia, and **China simply derailed entirely from the normal developmental trajectory of human society.**

Thus, the shaking of the old order prior to the dawn of the ***classical era*** undeniably possessed a certain "historical righteousness" (历史正义性 / it was conducive to social progress). This is inversely corroborated when we observe Egypt, the Indus Valley, and Mesopotamia—the three former core regions of human civilization that, under the rule of their primary civilizations, possessed zero energy to execute ***the Great Expansion***. As we shall see next, ***feudalization*** emerged exceedingly late in all three of these regions, a phenomenon that appears staggeringly abrupt when contrasted with their highly developed agricultural production levels.

Of course, we cannot rule out another possibility: agriculture heavily dependent on irrigation networks along the banks of major rivers is genuinely detrimental to the emergence of ***feudalization***.

This is indeed a plausible explanation, and it is corroborated by isolated evidence in regions with analogous environments. The Niger River bend region, as discussed in the previous chapter, plunged into severe decay following the collapse of the Songhai Empire and exhibited no considerable ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征), ultimately surrendering the leadership of ***feudalization*** in the Sahel region to the Fulani people two centuries later.

Floodplain agricultural zones along the banks of massive tropical rivers seem to possess an overwhelmingly strong inertia for maintaining a smallholder economy (小农经济). They struggle

even to develop the ***manorial economy*** (庄园经济) characteristic of early ***feudalization***. Perhaps this is genuinely because the former is simply more efficient under those specific agricultural conditions.

I once believed the banks of the Nile upstream of Egypt served as a similar example. The several Christian kingdoms within modern-day Sudan conspicuously lacked ***feudal characteristics*** right up until they were fundamentally annihilated by Islamic regimes around 1500 AD. They even retained prominent matriarchal characteristics in their inheritance systems. *(This perfectly explains why, despite both being Christian enclaves, Sudan was conquered by Islam after resisting for eight or nine centuries, whereas a* ***feudalized*** *Ethiopia remained staggeringly resilient and even launched counteroffensives.)* The Funj people (芬吉人) who eventually dominated Sudan also remained merely nominal Muslims for a very long time (see previous chapter).

But evidently, my understanding of the world outside China is still limited. I now know that the extent of flooding above the First Cataract of the Nile (尼罗河第一瀑布) is quite narrow, fundamentally insufficient to form the production mode dominated by floodplain agriculture seen in the Egyptian region below the First Cataract. In the so-called Nubia region, the Nile acts more as an elongated oasis; moving just a short distance from the river, the landscape rapidly transitions into a mixed agro-pastoral zone (农牧混合带). Under these specific conditions, the sluggishness of local ***feudalization*** is indeed unsurprising, but it cannot be categorized under the floodplain agriculture typology.

Regardless, Egypt and Mesopotamia indeed collapsed on the path toward a ***feudal society***; they could never again play leading roles on the international stage. This is perhaps a form of historical destiny: **conditions highly favorable in one epoch may mutate into decisively unfavorable ones in another.** It is akin to how the territory of the modern United States was undeniably exceedingly inhospitable to agricultural production during the pre-industrial era, yet in our current age, it is more than sufficient to incubate the world's supreme superpower.

There is another issue worth noting here. Although it has become customary in our nation to refer to ***early states*** as ***slavery societies*** (奴隶制国家/社会), in reality, **it was precisely the historical process of *The Great Expansion* that pushed slavery—or rather, physical human possession and the coercive exploitation of labor—to its absolute zenith.**

The reasons are essentially twofold: First, the voracious thirst to continuously develop new land summoned an astronomical demand for labor, transforming human laborers into highly coveted commodities. Second, wars of conquest inevitably reduced massive multitudes of the defeated into slaves.

Thus, we observe that during the late Roman Republic, the number of independent yeomen (自耕农) plummeted drastically, while a massive influx of slaves into Rome triggered the explosive development of the slave economy. This, in turn, precipitated various political and military reforms—some successful, others not. In the even earlier Greek world, whether in Athens or Sparta, the slave population vastly outnumbered the citizens. Even for the Aryans, before they settled in their newly conquered lands, class differentiation might not have been distinctly pronounced.

The situation in China remains somewhat opaque, simply because the academic debate over whether slavery actually existed in ancient China has become heavily politicized in our nation. However, there remains undeniable evidence proving that slavery expanded phenomenally during the period of ***The Great Expansion***. In the bronze inscriptions (金文) of the Shang Dynasty, we strictly see records of rewarding currency *(cowrie shells)*, but no records of rewarding human populations. Yet, in the bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty, there are voluminous records of rewarding, buying, and selling human populations.

I firmly believe that China's evolutionary trajectory in this regard should be entirely consistent with that of other regions.

While we previously heavily emphasized the monumental role played by pivotal technological innovations like bronze and iron, we must bear in mind that technology itself does not inherently dictate social mutation as a direct, standalone factor. After all, it is *humans* who apply the technology and wield the tools.

Constrained by objective natural conditions, certain technologies that universally trigger massive social structural shifts might completely fail to induce such changes under specific circumstances. When this occurs, the actual efficacy of the technology is phenomenally discounted.

Regarding the historical process of ***The Great Expansion***, the most crucial metrics must be:

1. Reaching the societal organizational level of an ***early state*** *(rather than remaining as overly backward tribal societies)*; and

2. Possessing a definite capacity to subjectively engineer and transform the environment *(rather than merely migrating and searching for new pre-existing settlements).*

If these two prerequisites are not satisfied, the expansion becomes exceedingly difficult to differentiate from humanity's primitive early migrations, and is utterly insufficient to forge a ***classical state***. *(Some might suggest including long-distance trade as a metric, but I believe this is unnecessary. Once the above two conditions are met, there is no logical reason for commercial*

factors not to emerge. Therefore, adhering strictly to Occam's Razor, I will not unnecessarily multiply entities).

For instance, we can observe the Bantu expansion (班图人扩张) and the Austronesian expansion (南岛人扩张) that similarly occurred in history. The geographical expanses they impacted were undeniably vast, and their transformative effects on local societies were undeniably profound. When the Bantu people conquered the southern half of the African continent, they had already mastered iron smelting; when the Austronesians conquered the Pacific, their navigational technology was astonishing.

However, regarding the former, Africa's natural environment was atrociously hostile to agricultural societies—resources were hyper-dispersed, and diseases ran rampant. The Bantu expansion was primarily conducted through primitive social morphologies like tribes or ***tribal confederacies*** (部落联盟), while the indigenous peoples in the regions they conquered were even more backward, lacking even the most rudimentary agricultural production skills.

Regarding the latter, although the Austronesians established ***early states*** on islands like Pohnpei (波纳佩岛) and Tonga (汤加岛), and constructed massive monumental architecture, certain technologies *(such as metal smelting)* were permanently lost during their migrations. After all, securing a stable supply of mineral ores across the boundless expanse of the Pacific Ocean is an absolute impossibility. When the ocean serves as an impenetrable natural barrier, let alone in antiquity, even today humanity's capacity to engineer it remains insignificantly minuscule. With inhabitants scattered across tiny, isolated islands, the very land they stood upon was phenomenally precious. Under such constraints, what could they genuinely transform?

As for the concepts of Aryans (雅利安人) and Indo-Europeans (印欧人)... due to the catastrophic devastation wrought by Nazi Germany's aggression in the 20th century, contemporary discussions about these groups are inevitably heavily contaminated by the influence of "political correctness" (政治正确).

There constantly exist discourses that excessively belittle the prowess and achievements of the Aryans, going so far as to assert that an organized invasion was "impossible," and that the expansion of Indo-European languages was merely the result of neighboring peoples "peacefully adopting" the new language. **This is glaringly an overcorrection of monumental proportions (**矫枉过正**).**

Although the Indo-European expansion was unequivocally not the conquest of a monolithic "Indo-European Empire" executed under a unified will, organized, long-distance invasions orchestrated by specific Indo-European tribes were absolutely, 100% possible.

Such examples occurred explicitly in our own nation's history. The ancestors of the Bamar people (缅族)—the dominant ethnic group in modern Myanmar—were Qiang people (羌人) who originally inhabited Northwestern China. They migrated southward along the eastern fringes of the Tibetan Plateau, ultimately reaching the Irrawaddy River basin (伊洛瓦底江流域) today, traversing a staggering distance of nearly 2,000 kilometers.

In the latter half of the **first millennium AD**, the density of ethnic group distribution to the west and southwest of China was significantly higher than during the era of the Aryan migrations, especially since ***classical empires*** like *Nanzhao* had already emerged. Yet, the unassailable fact we observe today is that the Bamar people firmly occupied the middle and lower plains of the Irrawaddy River, possessing a nation that, while struggling to govern its frontiers, still encompasses a remarkably large territory.

The expansion of the **Zulu** Kingdom (祖鲁王国) in the early 19th century further obliterates this "peaceful migration" myth. Under the leadership of a **Charismatic leader** like Shaka (恰卡), the aggression of the Zulu Kingdom, coupled with the encroachment of Europeans and climate shifts, forced myriad surrounding tribes into massive migrations—the furthest reaching all the way to the Great Lakes region. This geopolitical upheaval stimulated the genesis of the Kingdoms of **Lesotho** (莱索托) and **Eswatini** (斯威士兰). It forced multitudes of people to migrate thousands of kilometers, traversing vast latitudinal spans across Southern Africa—a region possessing an environment vastly more hostile than Central Eurasia.

In terms of technological capabilities, the Black populations of South Africa in the early 19th century were no superior to the Aryans of antiquity. Yet, they similarly executed massive, large-scale migrations accompanied by armed invasions.

Therefore, if the Indo-Europeans possessed critical technological resources that granted them monumental superiority—such as horses and chariots (马匹和马车)—and mastered the smelting and utilization of metal tools through interactions with peripheral peoples, executing widespread invasions under the command or coercion of one or more **Charismatic leaders** (卡里斯玛式领袖) was entirely, unequivocally possible.

Furthermore, the surviving literature from the Vedic period in India blatantly oozes the **"arrogance of the conqueror"** (征服者的傲慢). From absolutely any analytical angle, this renders the notion that the Indo-Europeans entered India via "**peaceful evolution**" (和平演变) utterly preposterous.

7, Who Could Emerge Victorious from The Great Expansion?

There were not a few ethnic groups participating in the historical event of ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张). Even for ethnic groups speaking Indo-European languages and entering the same massive region, they did not necessarily identify with one another. In China, even if ***The Great Expansion*** initially did not escape the control of the Zhou royal court, starting from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the various vassal states were forced to fight their own battles. In the historical process, although the emergence of a certain trend or mutation possesses inevitability, the groups or individuals endowed with the conditions to realize it are not necessarily singular. As for who precisely can claim the paramount merit, that is a moment that severely tests the subjective initiative and comprehensive capabilities of heroic figures; however, luck and timing are also indispensable. Today, the **founding heartlands** (龙兴之地) of the first batch of empires that arose after ***The Great Expansion*** we observe were universally situated on the periphery of civilization.

The Qin people, who unified China, had already established themselves in the western frontier of China during the Western Zhou period (*this is coincidentally a pun here, referring both to the specific place of Xi Quanqiu and the western border of the Zhu Xia [诸夏] at that time*). They later completely occupied the former lands of the Zhou people, then expanded southward to annex the Hanzhong and Ba-Shu regions, and ultimately conquered the other vassal states to the east. The state of Magadha, which unified India, was situated remarkably far east among the Indian Mahajanapadas; considering that the Aryans entered India from the northwest, this was precisely the eastern frontier of the Indo-Aryan states. In the mid-6th century BC, Magadha annexed the even more easterly state of Anga. At this point, the Magadhans had evidently secured a geopolitically superior position comparable to that of the Qin people. Over the course of the subsequent dynasties, they continuously expanded, ultimately ballooning into a massive empire during the Maurya Dynasty. Persia and Media need no further elaboration; these two regimes were situated on the periphery of ***the Near East*** (近东) civilization in the traditional sense (*up until 600 BC*). Macedonia was located on the northern periphery among the various Greek city-states, and was even deemed excessively barbaric by some southern Greek city-states. The waters faced by the city of Rome were the Western Mediterranean. Let alone comparing it to the traditional city-states of the Eastern Mediterranean, even compared to relatively remote colonial city-states like Carthage and Syracuse, Rome deviated even further from the civilizational center of the Eastern Mediterranean.

This consistency, in a certain sense, obliquely reflects the characteristics of the era of ***The Great Expansion***: being too close to the center of struggle merely wastes strength in vain with meager returns, entangling one in useless diplomatic relations and preventing the adoption of flexible

stances. The peripheral regions, conversely, are not only exempt from these anxieties and perils, but they can also, while avoiding excessive attention, annex the more backward small states and tribes deemed as ***barbarians*** (蛮族) (*which in a certain sense is a continuation of* ***The Great Expansion***), thereby expanding their own territories, increasing their populations, and ultimately securing an absolute advantage in national power. We might as well imagine: if situated in an era that was not expanding, but rather one where civilizational borders remained chronically fixed, could wars of unification still possibly conclude in the pattern established by the first batch of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国)? I am afraid this would be impossible. Under such conditions, even if the victor does not necessarily originate from the civilizational core region, they at least cannot be situated too far from the core. The core region of a civilization implies advanced socio-economic development, the most prosperous commercial activities, commanding pivotal communication arteries, and furthermore, representing righteousness and orthodoxy; it is a battleground of paramount strategic importance. Therefore, in ancient China there was the saying of **competing for the *Zhongyuan* (**中原**)** (逐鹿中原). This was even more typical in a closed island nation like Japan: samurai daimyo located too far from the Kinki region obviously stood no chance of sitting upon the throne of the **Tenkabito** [天下人], and both the Oda and Toyotomi regimes similarly completed the unification of Japan by establishing their foothold within the Kinai.

Therefore, I believe the actions of the Holy Roman Kaiser during the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期) were utterly unwise. In this era of land reclamation and explosive population growth (*relative to an agricultural society, of course; it cannot be compared to post-Industrial Revolution*), the German Kaiser failed to focus their gaze eastward; conversely, they marched to Italy time and time again, squandering time, manpower, and wealth, only to ultimately end up with nothing. History demonstrates that even if the Holy Roman Kaiser had remained completely inactive, the autonomous actions of the minor border vassals and knightly orders in eastern Germany alone had already secured colossal territories for the Germans by the ***early modern period*** (近代) (Ostsiedlung). The two most vital nations later on, Prussia and Austria, both benefited tremendously from this eastward expansion (*Prussia, in particular, was built entirely upon the foundation of eastward expansion*). Today, it is already utterly impossible to imagine how colossal an achievement the Germans could have secured in Europe, and how the French could have possibly responded, if the Holy Roman Kaiser of that era had been slightly more rational and balanced their energies invested in Italian and Eastern affairs. But I digress.

8, The Halting of The Great Expansion Carries Equal Historical Significance to Its Inception

The Great Expansion (封建化) and its monumental significance are effortless to observe. After all, the frontiers of civilization expanded staggeringly over the span of several centuries—a phenomenon undeniably impossible for any observer to overlook, let alone the fact that its late stages forged several immortal empires.

However, a highly crucial point that frequently eludes people's attention is this: **The halting of the expansion possesses a historical significance equally profound as the expansion itself.** The attainment of definitive, fixed borders by ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) was a paramount driving force for ***feudalization*** (封建化).

Why must we assert this?

First, we can conduct a simple thought experiment. When human society transitions from a ***slavery society*** (which directly exploits labor) to a ***feudal society*** (which exploits agricultural surplus via rent and taxation), the fundamental essence of this transition—regardless of how it specifically evolved, and though impossible to quantify perfectly—is that **land supplanted labor to occupy the primary position among factors of production (**首位生产要素**).**

Obviously, the most decisive factor triggering this mutation was the elevation of ***productive forces*** (生产力), making the **feudal mode of production** (封建生产方式) more efficient and yielding superior economic benefits for the ruling class. However, one must not forget that beyond this decisive factor, other variables exist. Among them, one conceptually paramount factor warrants specific attention: **"*Scarcity*" (**稀缺性**).**

This is exactly like the glaringly obvious principles of economics: when the quantity of anything multiplies to a certain magnitude, its "***scarcity***" drops below a certain threshold, and its perceived importance inevitably plummets. Because no one lacks it, no one considers it vital. Conversely, if an entity is indispensable to the production process, the scarcer it is, the more immense value people will attach to it.

Land is precisely such an entity. From the simplest logical deduction, it is not difficult to comprehend: If land is perpetually abundant relative to the population, the importance of land will be suppressed. Under such circumstances, rulers will inevitably attempt to intensify their absolute control over the physical bodies and the dependency relationships of the ruled, stripping away even more of their rights. **Population—rather than land—is thus elevated to the most paramount position.**

This scenario is phenomenally detrimental to the formation of a **feudal order** (封建秩序), because excessive elements of a ***slavery society*** are retained.

A slightly more recent historical example might elucidate this point: the "**Great Divergence**" (分流) between Western and Eastern Europe beginning in the 15th century. The traditional interpretation posits that as Western Europe's commercial and industrial economy developed and

marched toward a ***capitalist society***, serfdom (农奴制) inversely expanded in Central and Eastern Europe.

We must point out that while this "Divergence" theory possesses merit, it severely neglects the intrinsic temporal disparities in developmental trajectories across different regions. Eastern Europe's ***feudalization*** originally commenced roughly five centuries later than Western Europe's, and it was subsequently devastated by the shockwaves of the Mongol conquests. Therefore, when Western Europe was shedding serfdom, the fact that Eastern Europe was simultaneously intensifying it is inherently unremarkable. However, the tightening of pan-European market connections indeed exacerbated this trend. The industrializing cities of Western Europe generated a massive demand for imported grain, which naturally stimulated Eastern European ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) to tighten their grip on agricultural production, thereby reinforcing serfdom *(often termed the "Second Serfdom")*.

The core issue lies here: this theory seemingly cannot explain *every* Eastern European nation, particularly Russia.

The Russians and the Poles acquired maritime outlets almost simultaneously in the late 15th century, yet they adopted diametrically opposed policies. After conquering Gdańsk (格但斯克 / known to the Germans as Danzig), the Poles inherited the Hanseatic League's trade network there, aggressively utilizing it as the Kingdom of Poland's premier commercial port for foreign trade. Conversely, after the Grand Duchy of Moscow conquered Novgorod (诺夫哥罗德), the measure it adopted was to outright expel the Hanseatic merchants. For the ensuing three centuries, the volume of agricultural products exported by Russia remained vanishingly minuscule, a reality unchanged even by the establishment of the English Muscovy Company (英国-莫斯科公司).

Yet, despite this isolation from the Western export market, **the intensification of Russian serfdom was the most draconian among all Eastern European nations.** The legal status of serfs was explicitly codified: they were deemed the absolute property of the landlord, possessed virtually zero personal freedom, faced severe restrictions on migration, were subjected to forced labor on manorial estates, and lacked any economic autonomy. **This condition became fundamentally indistinguishable from outright slavery.**

Why did such a terrifying trend emerge? I contend that the harsh physical reality of Eastern Europe —**vast territories paired with a sparse population (**地广人稀**)**—was a paramount catalyst. Confronted with a catastrophic shortage of labor, it is entirely unsurprising that Russian rulers desired to maximize their control over the bodies of the laboring underclass.

Let alone a nation like Russia, where the ***feudal system*** (封建制度) was insufficiently developed. Even in the labor-starved New World—within newly independent regimes that had completely inherited the legacy of Western European ***feudal societies*** (封建社会)—some nations failed to abolish slavery for an exceedingly long time, such as Brazil. Even in the United States, which was already a "bourgeois democratic regime" (资产阶级民主政权 / *I use the phrasing customary in China here, hoping it does not confuse readers*) at the time of its independence, slavery in the South was only eradicated nearly a century after the nation's founding.

16th-century Russian society was vastly more backward: **feudal** contractual relations were underdeveloped, urbanization was severely retarded, the burgher class (市民阶层) was impotent, the economy was sealed off, and the monumental ideological revolutions spawned by ***medieval society*** were utterly invisible in Russia. Under these circumstances, one genuinely could not expect Russia to embark on any trajectory other than the extreme fortification of serfdom.

Starting from the 16th century, the Russians leveraged advanced Western military technology to execute military conquests toward the East and South that spanned over three centuries. Any observer would likely marvel at how effortlessly this process unfolded. A minuscule number of Russian conquerors advanced in a "zigzag" pattern along the massive rivers of Siberia, effortlessly repelling indigenous Tatars who outnumbered them tenfold merely by relying on primitive wooden bastions (木质棱堡), eventually reaching the Pacific Ocean. Shortly thereafter, the Tatars of Southern Russia were subjugated, followed by the Caucasus region and ***Central Asia***. *(The reason I do not consider the nations conquered to Russia's west, like Poland, in this context is because their population densities were not necessarily lower than Russia's heartland, and thus they do not factor into this specific dynamic).*

This astronomical territorial growth exacerbated the already dire ***scarcity*** of manpower. The constantly shifting frontiers made Russian rulers pathologically vigilant against serf flights, particularly terrified of anti-serfdom rebellions actively resisting the Russian central authority from these frontier regions. For intelligent and ruthless autocrats like Peter the Great (彼得一世) and Catherine the Great (叶卡捷琳娜二世), they fundamentally had no option but to further intensify the oppression of the serfs.

The demographic fluctuations in Russian history laterally corroborate this point. Between 1700 and 1900—even if we exclusively consider ethnic Russians to deliberately filter out the demographic impact of conquered regions—Tsarist Russia remained the fastest-growing nation globally in terms of population *(perhaps arguably without parallel)*. *(This naturally excludes nations whose scales were too minuscule or immigrant nations that gained independence from European colonies).* If Russia hadn't repeatedly suffered catastrophic internal and external political disasters in the 20th century, this demographic explosion would have manifested even more phenomenally.

But then again, perhaps this very anomalous fortification of Russian serfdom—and the monumental setbacks it implied for Russia's transition from a ***feudal society*** to a ***capitalist society***—was precisely the root cause of Russia's tragic and tumultuous destiny in the 20th century.

Regardless of whether in China or abroad, territorial expansion is universally lauded as the "glorious achievement" (盛事) of an empire. However, the history of the ***feudal period*** (封建时代) proves that annexing massive territories—especially vast, sparsely populated lands awaiting development—during an inappropriate social stage is highly likely to trigger a severe reactionary backlash against social progress.

This mirrors what people observe during the Age of Discovery: Spain and Portugal, obsessed with "carving up the world" and annexing colossal territories, rapidly plummeted into decay, while the Netherlands, which prioritized commercial interests, secured dominance. However, once the capitalist system has firmly consolidated itself within the mother country, massive territorial annexations will no longer inflict structural damage upon the metropole *(the worst that could happen is simply allowing the colonies to gain independence in various forms later on)*; the mother country's international status remains top-tier globally, as was the case with Britain and France. The profound complexity of human society is clearly evident here.

Perhaps some might ask: *Was the serfdom society in China's Tibet similarly governed by this dynamic?*

Because of contemporary political realities, the historical issue of Tibet has become almost impossible to examine objectively. The various factions engaged in the debate basically just vomit emotional rhetoric from their entrenched stances, making it exceedingly difficult for people to access reliable historical data.

However, Tibetan serfdom undeniably differs from the Russian scenario. When we describe Russia as having "vast territories and sparse populations" (地广人稀), we mean that the labor force was catastrophically insufficient *relative* to the massive expanse of *developable* land—not merely that an enormous area possessed an abysmal ecological carrying capacity. Although the Tibetan region encompasses a colossal area, its natural conditions are genuinely atrocious. If the population on the plateau could inherently only be sustained at a meager level, then the labor force relative to the demands of extensive agricultural production was not necessarily "scarce."

Compared to Western Europe, or even Russia during its serfdom era, where a serf could still carve out a meager existence provided they successfully fled, **fleeing as a serf under Tibet's natural conditions was frequently a pure death sentence.** A serf's flight only possessed a sliver of viability in the border regions, escaping entirely out of the Tibetan plateau—for instance, migrating southward to Nepal or India, as the natural environment there was phenomenally superior.

Therefore, although ***feudalization*** indeed commenced following the collapse of the Tibetan Empire (吐蕃帝国), the Tibetan region—severely constrained by its physical geography—seemingly evolved an anomalous model. It relied intensely on religion as its binding nexus, with monasteries functioning as mega-***feudal lords*** and regional governance centers. *(In morphology, it somewhat resembled the early city-states of Mesopotamia, where the state was organized around the temple).* This diverges significantly from the Russian paradigm.

At the conclusion of this section, we must point out that introducing "***scarcity***" as a **sub-variable** (副变量) alongside the **primary variable** (主变量) of ***productive forces*** to determine the status of various factors of production unexpectedly provides an exceptionally excellent predictive model for observing the rise and fall of humanity's ***early states*** (早期国家)**.**

We shall cast our gaze upon the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia. This is undeniably a premier, immaculate specimen for modern scholars to observe the evolution of ***early states***. The civilization here birthed exceedingly early, and the historical epoch of its ***early state*** stage was monumentally protracted. Simultaneously, the earliest writing systems emerged here, and its script was phenomenally developed. The voluminous textual and archaeological evidence unearthed thus far allows us, at the very least, to grasp the holistic social panorama of ancient Mesopotamia across its various epochs.

More critically, Mesopotamia's environment was absolutely not as statically stable as Egypt's. **And it is precisely within a dynamic, fluctuating record of samples that objective laws can truly be illuminated.**

The various regimes of ancient Mesopotamian civilization were undoubtedly situated within the ***early state*** stage. Unskilled labor consistently occupied the paramount position among factors of production; consequently, the primary mode of exploitation was compulsory forced labor.

However, the Mesopotamia basin—particularly its lower reaches—was severely ravaged by soil salinization (土地盐碱化). Soil salinization decimates the acreage of usable land and astronomically inflates the costs of land utilization. Thus, during certain epochs, a specific paradigm could materialize: the population size became overwhelmingly excessive relative to the land available for cultivation.

Because the ***scarcity*** of land skyrocketed while the ***scarcity*** of labor plummeted, the dominant, ruling status of labor among the factors of production began to waver. Readers will readily think of the famous Third Dynasty of Ur (乌尔第三王朝). For many years prior to the establishment of the Third Dynasty of Ur, soil salinization in the Sumerian region had been steadily increasing. Consequently, wheat was gradually supplanted by the more salt-tolerant barley. During the absolute

zenith of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the agricultural output per unit of land plummeted by roughly 50% compared to the Early Dynastic Period.

Simultaneously, during the late Akkadian Empire, a global climatic drought event triggered catastrophic social crises in the rain-fed agricultural zones of northern Mesopotamia, forcing massive populations to migrate southward into the Sumerian region. Therefore, we observe that during the reign of the Third Dynasty of Ur, land manifested a state of acute shortage due to skyrocketing reclamation costs and plummeting yields, while settlement densities indicated a remarkably high population. **A brutal social reality of "overpopulation and land *scarcity*" (**人多地少**) had formed.**

Consequently, we can explicitly note that the Third Dynasty of Ur exhibited certain **"classical"** characteristics. The most representative among them was a highly complex bureaucratic system, so intricate that it genuinely bears the suspicion of being a form of **administrative totalitarianism** (行政极权主义).

Undoubtedly, during the reign of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the status of land as a factor of production surged rapidly. Hence, we witness a pseudo-feudal logic akin to "tenancy" (租佃). While the state owned the public fields, it simultaneously leased massive tracts of tenant fields to individuals—usually bureaucrats or powerful local elites—collecting a fixed percentage of the harvest. Concurrently, the state distributed ration fields (口粮田) to bureaucrats, military officers, and even high-ranking artisans as an alternative to paying them wages in kind. From a morphological perspective, those granted land by the state were nominally serving the royal court, but because they possessed the rights to manage the land and expropriate its surplus value, they exhibited the distinct facade of a ***landlord class***.

The renowned Great King Shulgi (舒勒吉), while maintaining his colossal bureaucratic apparatus, also deployed machinations characteristic of a classical monarch. On one hand, he obliterated the autonomous space of local powerful clans through standardized weights and measures, a unified calendar, and administrative "software"; on the other hand, through patronage, appointments, and dismissals, he funneled the youth of local families into specialized Sumerian-language schools, enabling them to serve in public office.

However, we must explicitly point out: **The Third Dynasty of Ur merely possessed *classical characteristics*; it was obviously light-years away from a true *classical state*.**

Feudalism could fundamentally never sprout from the political structure of the Third Dynasty of Ur because its agriculture was intensely **involuted (**内卷**)**—meaning astronomical amounts of human

and material resources were invested, yet the marginal returns were appallingly low. Landlords needed to remain parasites attached to a bureaucratic system to survive. If land ownership were fragmented into small parcels, the entire region would be incapable of maintaining the massive public works engineering required to ensure agricultural production.

In stark contrast, the genuine unfolding of ***feudalization*** is an irreversible revolution triggered by the sufficient development of ***productive forces***. It makes land reclamation viable at the micro-unit level, even down to individual families. This is the very bedrock for the emergence of the ***natural economy*** (自然经济) during early ***feudalization***. ***Feudalization*** is absolutely inseparable from the advent of advanced tools and technologies; they are what guarantee that land will surpass raw labor to occupy the paramount position among factors of production.

One can easily discern that although the Third Dynasty of Ur appeared to resemble a ***classical state*** regarding its highly developed bureaucratic system, it still conspicuously lacked myriad core features possessed by ***genuine classical states***. In its essence, a ***classical empire*** is the product of ***productive forces*** developing to a highly specific stage. The empire can expropriate colossal surpluses through its bureaucratic system, and this surplus manifests in opulent urban civic life, a highly developed ***commodity economy***, open-minded cultural creation, and ferocious outward expansion.

Conversely, the Third Dynasty of Ur was situated in the twilight phase of Sumerian civilization. The establishment of its system originated, to a large extent, from the social realities of severe ecological degradation and hyper-acute population-to-land contradictions; it was subsequently utilized to combat these detrimental factors. Therefore, the production surplus that the Third Dynasty of Ur could actually exploit was phenomenally limited. **Merely sustaining its own existence was an agonizing struggle.**

Thus, we observe that the territory of the Third Dynasty of Ur was vastly smaller than that of the Akkadian Empire; its core zone essentially retreated entirely into the alluvial plains of southern Mesopotamia. It was an introverted, high-pressure state. Judging from the limited historical records, the primary objective of its military operations was consolidating borders and maintaining domestic stability, even under the reign of a renowned monarch like Shulgi. Later, to fend off Amorite incursions, it even constructed the famous Amorite Wall (阿摩利墙) north of modern-day Baghdad. *(Naturally, when order collapsed from within, border fortifications were inevitably rendered useless).*

The Third Dynasty of Ur undoubtedly possessed magnificent cities, but the economic significance of these cities lay entirely in operating a rationing system (配给制). Under such circumstances, one fundamentally could not expect an independent burgher class (市民阶层) or cultural activities tailored to their aesthetics.

As for the literature of the **Third Dynasty of Ur** (乌尔第三王朝), it is even more notorious: heavily saturated with hymns to the royal court and the deification of the monarch, utterly devoid of the exploration of the unknown and the universal rationalism characteristic of classical imperial literary creation. Of course, we must point out that the literary forms of the Third Dynasty of Ur cannot be entirely blamed on the monarch's megalomania. Under such an extreme bureaucratic system, monarchs like Shulgi deifying themselves indeed served the pragmatic function of lowering the "verification costs" (校验成本) of a hyper-complex system. But this identically reflects the agonizing arduousness with which the Third Dynasty of Ur operated its convoluted bureaucracy.

Finally, we must point out that although the Third Dynasty of Ur appeared to process a colossal volume of imported and exported goods, it possessed virtually zero substantive "***commodity economy***" (商品经济). It was merely operating a "quantified state logistics system" (国家物流量化系统) on an international scale. The primary objective of this state trading behavior was not to generate profit, but to ensure the state apparatus could acquire sufficient resources it could not produce domestically *(such as metal and timber)*. And although silver was utilized as a standard of value (价值尺度) during this era, it was absolutely not an actual medium of exchange. Ordinary laborers and low-ranking bureaucrats were almost exclusively paid in physical rations.

Of course, we should not purely disparage the Third Dynasty of Ur; it is justifiably regarded as the "Sumerian Renaissance." The standardized writing system, weights and measures, and legal formats it pioneered paved the way for subsequent Near Eastern civilizations. This amply demonstrates that the immense concentration of resources and power under the rule of the Third Dynasty of Ur—beyond merely sustaining the operation of the system itself—also yielded magnificent civilizational outputs.

Ultimately, the institutional structure of the Third Dynasty of Ur can be perceived as a vast social experiment conducted amidst severe crises. It was *not* a scenario where rulers premeditatedly and systematically suffocated the entire society's future purely for short-term, selfish interests. However, the governance model of the Third Dynasty of Ur was inevitably doomed to be unsustainable. Bureaucratic systems possess an inherent proclivity for self-proliferation; overly microscopic and precise social management lacks the redundancy required to withstand sudden catastrophic shocks; and under labor-intensive agriculture, soil salinization would inevitably and inexorably worsen. Therefore, that the Third Dynasty of Ur managed to sustain its dynastic lifespan for an entire century is actually quite reasonable.

In stark contrast to the Third Dynasty of Ur, the later **Kassite Dynasty** (加喜特王朝) during the Middle Babylonian period confronted a diametrically opposed scenario: **"vast land and sparse population" (**地多人少**).** This was because, following the collapse of the Old Babylonian Empire, Mesopotamia was battered by prolonged warfare and plagues, resulting in a catastrophic loss of population. Relative to the surviving population, "distributable land" was in extreme surplus.

Consequently, the ruling logic of the Kassite Dynasty reverted squarely back to the **"physical human possession" (**人身占有**)** universally prevalent in ***early states***. Rulers no longer pursued what percentage of grain the ruled could surrender; instead, they demanded that the subjects physically engage in corvée labor (徭役) at specific times. Within the *Kudurru* (库杜如 / boundary stones) steles of the Kassite Dynasty, there are voluminous records of kings bestowing massive tracts of land upon royal family members or high-ranking generals. Yet, the core privilege these steles emphasized was *not* the size or boundaries of the land, but rather **"the privilege of exempting the population on said land from performing corvée labor for the state".**

These historical realities explicitly demonstrate that during the Kassite Dynasty, **labor was unquestionably the *primary factor of production*.** This aligns perfectly with humanity's understanding of a standard ***early state***. In fact, the Kassite Dynasty is universally recognized as a regime in ancient Mesopotamia with a relatively low degree of bureaucratization and highly decentralized rule. The king essentially outsourced the jurisdiction over labor to his vassals—a practice remarkably reminiscent of the Western Zhou Dynasty's *Fengjian* system of "bestowing people and bestowing territories" (授民授疆土).

By examining two highly representative regimes within ancient Mesopotamian civilization, we have once again proven the absolute universality of our newly established sociological framework across human historical time and space.

Thus, we have executed a phenomenally effective, structural repair of Marx's "Historical Materialism" based on class analysis: **The mutations within the ruling class and corresponding class relations are dictated by shifts in the *primary factor of production*; and *which* factor of production commands dominance in a specific historical epoch is fundamentally determined by the developmental level of the *productive forces*.**

Overall, up to the present day, unskilled labor, land, and capital have sequentially occupied the throne of the ***primary factor of production***. This aligns perfectly with historical intuition:

1. In the agonizingly protracted epoch preceding the Agricultural Revolution, a minuscule number of humans lived across boundless expanses of land via hunting and gathering; naturally, **labor** was the most vital.

2. Following the conclusion of ***The Great Expansion*** around the dawn of the Common Era, the rise of ***classical empires*** expanded the influence of agricultural civilization across the vast majority of continents; thus, the **land** that sustained agriculture became the most vital.

3. After the Industrial Revolution, humanity transitioned from agricultural to industrial civilization, and the supremacy of **capital** became glaringly manifest.

Between these three archetypal states lie protracted transitional epochs. As ***productive forces*** continually advance, the relative importance of these factors of production is concurrently disrupted by **sub-variables** (副变量).

Among these latent sub-variables, the most prominent is **"*Scarcity*" (**稀缺性**)**. The status of a surplus factor of production inevitably plummets, while the status of a deficient factor skyrockets. **"*Scarcity*" does not directly alter the *productive forces*, but it can monumentally mutate the *relations of production*.**

Another immensely influential factor is **Commercial Trade** (商业贸易). Trade alters neither the most fundamental ***productive forces*** nor the ***relations of production***; instead, it acts directly upon the ***superstructure*** (上层建筑): **it can spectacularly artificially amplify the power of the state bureaucracy.** In antiquity, this manifested as nations situated along crucial trade routes exhibiting ***classical characteristics*** phenomenally early, or miraculously sustaining ***classical characteristics*** long after the ***classical era*** had ended. In the ***modern era***, this manifests as certain major resource-exporting nations maintaining military power and geopolitical influence utterly disproportionate to their actual developmental levels.

By utilizing these three hierarchical influencing factors of varying significance, the entirety of human history can be fundamentally and coherently explained through this reconstructed theory of class evolution.

Finally, I shall briefly mention this: ***scarcity relations*** absolutely do not exclusively emerge between labor and land. Land and capital, and even labor and capital, identically constitute ***scarcity*** dynamics.

We must emphatically point out that—contrary to what those benevolent and naive Western observers perceive—the staggering "scarcities" that materialize within ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** (复辟官僚国家) are absolutely not "operational failures of the system." Rather, they are highly likely **"necessary mechanisms deliberately engineered for the express purpose of maintaining the regime's own existence."**

Unlike commercial speculators who hoard commodities merely to turn a quick, short-term profit, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) deliberately attempts—across generations, or even vastly longer timeframes—to **artificially manufacture *scarcity***. Its goal is to coercively distort and reverse the ***relations of production*** purely to preserve its despotic rule. **This caliber of diabolical, Machiavellian malice is something absolutely incomprehensible to anyone who has not lived within it.**

9, Clearly Defined Land Ownership is the Fundamental Prerequisite for Feudalization

Beyond the aforementioned factors, there is another critical issue: ***feudal society*** (封建社会) intrinsically demands crystalline boundaries for the territories held by its lords. From the lowliest nobility to the most formidable monarch, explicitly defining *"who governs which land"* is absolutely paramount to the formation of ***feudalism*** (封建主义). Even for the peasants attached to a ***feudal lord*** (封建领主), the specific types of property rights they hold over specific plots of land must be unambiguously codified. The rights and obligations between rulers and the ruled, as well as among rulers of varying echelons, must be rigidly stipulated through contracts (契约) mutually acknowledged by all parties.

Although China never experienced a genuine ***feudal society***—and consequently Chinese people, naturally including myself, inherently lack any historical memory of a ***feudal society***—through my limited observation of Europe and Japan, I firmly assert this: **The precise demarcation of power boundaries and the awakening of rights consciousness (权利意识) represent the most monumental achievements humanity attained during the *feudal era*. They rendered a staggeringly indispensable contribution to our march toward modern civilization.** And this achievement is absolutely inseparable from the definitive confirmation of land rights (土地确权).

The Great Expansion (大扩张) does not abruptly terminate the moment a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) is born. Relying on its formidable national power and centralized apparatus, the empire can pursue neighboring ***barbarians*** (蛮族) deep into their own territories, stretching its frontiers to unfathomable distances.

However, at the absolute terminal nerve-endings of imperial power, there fundamentally lacks sufficient population to execute actual development. The scale of civilian migration is woefully insufficient to alter local cultural customs, let alone ethnic compositions. The empire's presence here relies entirely upon minuscule garrisons in isolated colonial cities to control crucial transportation arteries, maintain a military deterrent against peripheral backward peoples, exact certain tributes, or merely demand nominal subjugation. Alternatively, it merely manifests as military fortresses guarding against potential foreign invasions. An infinitesimally small number of imperial citizens voluntarily engage in commercial activities here, and the labor force in military agricultural colonies (屯垦区) is almost entirely forcibly relocated via administrative mandates.

Overall, the ***classical empire's*** investments in these frontier zones glaringly exceed its revenues. Unless there are high-quality mineral deposits to extract, governing such frontiers is driven overwhelmingly by political and military intentions. *(One merely needs to observe the frontiers of*

the Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties or the Roman Empire to understand this; I will not elaborate further).

Some might suspect: *If the population of a* ***classical empire*** *continued to multiply indefinitely, could these "fuzzy frontiers" (*模糊边疆*) eventually evolve into solid hinterlands, serving as springboards for even further expansion?*

However, history seemingly repudiates this possibility. The advancement of human society is wave-like: during certain epochs, it surges forward explosively; during others, it appears to plunge into stagnation. **A *classical empire* possesses zero opportunity to utilize surplus labor to permanently saturate these frontiers. Long before it can do so, it will inevitably disintegrate amidst the inexorable process of *feudalization*** (封建化)**.** In fact, as we shall soon see, these exact types of "fuzzy frontiers" hold monumental significance for the ***feudalization*** orchestrated by ***barbarians***.

In summary, no matter how formidable a ***classical empire*** is, its territorial expanse will eventually hit an absolute upper limit (上界); and ***feudalization*** earliest materializes strictly within this geographical perimeter.

If one examines European history, it is effortless to notice that throughout the ***Early Middle Ages***, the establishment of feudal regimes basically never transcended the maximum frontiers of the Roman Empire. The massive agricultural development of the Germanic regions only truly commenced during the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期). The same holds true for China. Even though the bureaucratic system later achieved its **restoration** in our nation, the civilizational boundaries forged by the Han Dynasty remained fundamentally unaltered for over ten centuries following the collapse of the Eastern Han. The only difference was that the frontiers *already* secured by the Han Dynasty became fully developed.

It is said that the Japanese text *Gen'i Shū* (源威集) records a highly legendary tale: when Hōjō Masako (北条政子) was young, she had a dream in which she married a colossal giant who *"lay stretched from Kikaijima (*鬼界岛*) to Sotogahama (*外浜*)."* This tale was utilized to legitimize the Minamoto clan's (源氏) rule over the realm. From Kikaijima to Sotogahama—meaning from the southernmost tip of Kyushu to the northernmost tip of Honshu—this perfectly delineated the absolute entirety of Japan's national territory at the dawn of the ***Middle Ages***. And that giant sprawling across this territory, was it not the perfect metaphor for the Samurai (武士) who were destined to govern this very land?

The Great Expansion officially concludes upon reaching a definitive, finite boundary, and this historical culmination similarly irreversibly alters the macro-consciousness of the entire society.

Imagine how the Japanese during the Asuka and Nara periods (飞鸟奈良时期) viewed the world. For them, "**subjugating the barbarians**" (征夷) was merely a matter of timing, devoid of any technological hurdles. As long as the imperial court amassed surplus wealth, continuously driving the Emishi (虾夷人) further north was never an issue.

But by the era of the *Taiheiki* (太平记 / 14th century), societal consciousness could fundamentally no longer operate like that. Japan's national boundaries had become absolutely fixed. The land under heaven had become a zero-sum game: **"If you gain a parcel, I must lose a parcel."**

It was precisely this hyper-acute consciousness revolving around land appropriation that catalyzed immensely positive effects for the formation of ***feudalism***. For a nation with such unique characteristics as Japan, this was astronomically vital. At this exact moment in history, the insular, geographically closed nature of the island nation miraculously transformed into an absolute blessing.

However, the distinct peculiarity of the ***feudal period*** (封建时代) lies precisely in this: **people's subjective perception of the era violently diverged from the objective advancement of social development.** The same principle applies here.

When civilization expanded to its absolute limits, population growth inevitably meant land became increasingly scarce, because the easily developable virgin lands within the empire had fundamentally been exhausted. The massive land annexations by early **feudal manors** (封建庄园) and the massive influx of ***barbarians*** drastically exacerbated this crisis.

And the terrible events did not stop there. The acute tension in the population-to-land ratio, urban decay, and the disintegration of political order could inflict catastrophic devastation upon public health. For instance, we observe that highly destructive plagues proliferated during both the twilight of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the reign of Justinian.

Consequently, the confident, open, inclusive, proactive, and optimistic ethos forged during ***The Great Expansion*** and sustained through ***the zenith of classical empires*** was rapidly annihilated within just a century or two. The societal atmosphere grew increasingly anti-rational, and skepticism ran rampant. People grew profoundly pessimistic about the future, and their thoughts and actions became increasingly narrow-minded and parochial. This was entirely understandable at the time, for the world had genuinely become a far more dangerous place; people had every reason to harbor intense vigilance against those different from themselves.

What I specifically wish to emphasize here is this: **Although *social consciousness* seemingly regressed at the very onset of *feudalization*, many transformations that would later prove monumentally significant had already quietly begun.**

For instance, after people were violently compelled to abandon grand imperial narratives, they began to focus far more intensely on the destiny of the individual and engage in individualistic creation. China's *Nineteen Old Poems* (古诗十九首) serves as a perfect example. People ceased to care about the massive "***communities***" (大共同体) that once dominated social life—whether that be the imperial court, provincial governments, the legions, or the state church—because they were either already utterly destroyed or struggling just to save themselves.

Instead, individuals sought personal salvation and liberation. The religions that perfectly adapted to this trend undeniably secured spectacular triumphs, maintaining their global prestige to this day. Intellectuals began to desperately ponder the underlying causes behind the world's mutations and how humans ought to navigate such agonizing times. Keen observation and deep introspection became the dominant themes of writing—just like Japan's *Gukanshō* (愚管抄), *Tsurezuregusa* (徒然草), and *Jinnō Shōtōki* (神皇正统记).

Judged from today's perspective, these new consciousnesses were still exceptionally immature. The stances of certain authors were not aligned with historical progress, and some of their conclusions have long since been repudiated. **Yet, it was precisely the profound contemplations forged in those eras of chaos and peril that constituted the genesis point for the eventual pacification and rebuilding of the world.**

The ambiguity of borders becoming an obstruction to ***feudalization*** harbors another easily recognizable problem. For a ***classical empire***, behind these shifting borders, there inevitably existed multitudes of "uncivilized peoples" (化外之民) sheltered behind natural geographical barriers—and their numbers were substantial. Otherwise, what reason would the empire have not to push its borders forward to a secure, easily defensible position?

This phenomenon was glaringly conspicuous in the regions dominated by the tropical monsoon climate across ***South and Southeast Asia***. These regions were densely cloaked in jungles, and their annual precipitation was appallingly uneven. A tropical monsoon climate differs entirely from a tropical rainforest climate: the latter's rainfall is relatively evenly distributed throughout the year, but the former's precipitation is catastrophically concentrated within less than one-third of the year under the monsoon's influence. Furthermore, the protracted dry season is sub-divided into a "hot season" (热季) and a "cool season" (凉季).

This dynamic diverges radically from the temperate zones. In the North Temperate Zone, the sun's angle of incidence peaks at the summer solstice; because heat must accumulate, the hottest period of the year falls between July and August. However, half of the Indian subcontinent and virtually the entire Indochinese peninsula lie south of the Tropic of Cancer. This means a massive portion of this region is already blasted by direct solar radiation *before* the summer solstice. While the North Temperate Zone is still in spring, these regions have already become excruciatingly scorching. Even in our ***modern era***, news frequently reports mass casualties from heatstroke in India during April and May.

As the monsoons arrive bearing torrential downpours, the extreme heat is somewhat mitigated, but roads are instantly severed, and the perils of travel skyrocket. Even the most fiercely resolute, lightly-packed ascetic monks are compelled to settle down temporarily during the rainy season (雨季安居), let alone merchants transporting cargo or a massive marching army.

Throughout the entire ***classical period***, India was perpetually forced to confront this reality. Even the capacity of the government fluctuated cyclically with the seasons. Only during the cool season could political power be projected to its maximum radius; during the rainy season, it drastically withered.

This is astonishingly similar to the **Mandala system** (曼荼罗体制) proposed by scholars when describing the history of ***Southeast Asia***. *(Southern India probably fits this even better, as it was developed later, had a smaller population, and lacked massive, contiguous fertile plains. Furthermore, as* ***feudal society*** *developed, this phenomenon would inevitably be drastically eradicated, because* ***feudalization*** *fundamentally necessitates that state politics transition into a continuous "surface area" (面状) topology—this rule is immutable everywhere).*

The Mandala system lacks explicitly defined national borders; rather, it operates as a nexus of vassalage and tributary relationships centered around a powerful core state. It heavily emphasizes personal allegiance between rulers. Vassals can simultaneously possess their own vassal systems and declare fealty to multiple suzerains simultaneously.

Because India's historical processes initiated relatively early, its population density grew correspondingly high. During the Indian ***Middle Ages*** *(from the collapse of the Gupta Empire to the consolidation of the Mughal Empire—a timeframe remarkably close to Europe's. However, I believe the end of this period did not signify that India had already evolved into* ***late feudal society****; rather, Europeans arrived relatively early, subjecting India to external influence and gradually reducing it to a colony)*, as population skyrocketed and massive land reclamation progressed, the shadows of the Mandala system eventually vanished from both Northern and Southern India.

Even so, in the late 19th century—when Britain fully controlled India—roughly one-tenth of India's population still resided in forests and hilly terrains. Their most glaring distinction from other Indian

inhabitants was that they lacked the caste system. They were referred to as “tribal populations” (部落居民), a nomenclature even the British colonial government retained during its censuses. Two centuries earlier, during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (奥朗则布), peasant flight remained a cripplingly severe problem simply because arable land remained relatively abundant.

These facts dictate that until the British established a military presence with an overwhelming superiority over indigenous rulers on the South Asian subcontinent, for the 2,000 years following the dawn of the ***classical era***, the Indians—despite constantly attempting to compress their **“internal frontiers” (**内部边疆**)**—never successfully completed the eradication process.

This forms a staggering contrast with temperate regions. One simply cannot fathom that in 1840, within the heartland of China under the Qing Dynasty’s rule, 10% of the population—equating to 40 million people.—could roam entirely outside the grasp of the state apparatus, treating the imperial court’s laws as nonexistent. In **feudal** Europe or Japan, this is equally unimaginable.

Forests, hills, and mountainous terrains forged colossal “frontier zones” right within the interior of Indian civilization. This meant that even progressing into the ***Middle Ages***, the jurisdictional boundaries of a ***feudal lord*** were phenomenally difficult to demarcate. The situation was even more severe during the preceding ***classical empire*** era. Among the various ***classical empires*** across the Eurasian landmass, the frontiers of China and Rome were the most rigidly defined, whereas those of India’s Maurya and Gupta Empires (孔雀王朝和笈多王朝) were the most nebulous. Basically, no one can accurately delineate exactly where the borders of these two empires should be drawn—this is particularly glaring along their southern flanks.

Beyond the perimeter of “Civilized India,” there perpetually existed an alternative society accommodating tribal members, runaway peasants, egalitarians, and those unwilling to submit to government jurisdiction. This might sound idyllic, but it was undeniably detrimental to the consolidation of a *feudal system* (封建制度). Countless massive and minuscule ***communities*** (社群) operated autonomously within their respective territories. The state apparatus could merely attempt to rein them in, but fundamentally lacked the capacity to annihilate them.

Consequently, India as a whole struggled monumentally to manifest a distinct, sharply stratified class society morphology. The sheer number and proportion of the population drifting outside the *“lord-vassal / lord-peasant”* (领主-领民) system were simply too staggeringly high. It wasn’t until the eve of the British invasion that the power of these ***communities*** began to suffer significant decay. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that even today, the “***community***” remains a hyper-sensitive topic in India, frequently wielded as a banner for political mobilization. Its terrifyingly enduring influence is clearly evident.

Iran suffered from strikingly parallel afflictions. Although its western frontiers bordered the highly developed regions of ***the Near East***, its frontiers facing Afghanistan and ***Central Asia*** to the east were atrociously nebulous. The Alborz Mountains (厄尔布尔士山脉) in the north historically served as an absolute paradise for resistors—they even violently resisted Iran's own central government.

Considering that the Iranian region *(measured by the territories ruled by the Sasanian Empire /* 萨珊帝国*)* at least did not suffer from cyclical seasonal shifts causing communications to be intermittently severed or government power to perpetually wax and wane like the Indian subcontinent, the total number and proportion of "uncivilized peoples" (化外之民) in Iran should have been smaller than in India. **However, they were infinitely more destructive.**

The tribal residents of India merely wanted to be left alone to live their own lives. They possessed neither the necessity nor the desire to organize; they merely expressed a passive resistance against regional Indian governments and rarely harbored intentions of launching reverse invasions.

The tribes dwelling in the Iranian mountains were an entirely different beast. Merely to survive, they were compelled to maintain a potent military force. When the timing was ripe, it was entirely plausible for them—under the command of a **Charismatic leader** (卡里斯玛式领袖)—to conquer a chaotic Iran, or at least a massive chunk of it. This dynamic became glaringly conspicuous following the mass migrations of the Turkic peoples (突厥人大迁徙).

For Iran, the belated commencement of the ***feudalization*** process triggered a devastating chain reaction. Battered by wave after wave of invaders, Iran during the ***Middle Ages*** genuinely plunged into the terrifying ***"Chaotic Era"*** (乱纪元) straight out of the novel *The Three-Body Problem* (《三体》).

10, Why Did Classical Empires Emerge So Early in Iran and India?

The widespread existence of massive tribes and grassroots ***communities*** (社群) is undeniably a detrimental factor for ***feudalization*** (封建化). Yet, bizarrely enough, their pervasive existence might have enabled ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) to emerge much earlier, even though the standard morphology of a ***classical empire*** would not appear until much later.

If we observe Iran and India, this paradox immediately surfaces before our eyes. From the birth of the Achaemenid Dynasty (阿契美尼德王朝) to Iran's typical ***late-classical states*** *(Sasanian Persia,*

which will be discussed shortly), there is a staggering gap of 11 centuries. Similarly, from the establishment of the Maurya Dynasty (孔雀王朝) to the collapse of the Gupta Dynasty (笈多王朝), the span exceeds 800 years. *(Though it should be noted that before the Maurya Dynasty was established, the Kingdom of Magadha had already been expanding for two centuries, having achieved hegemony over Northern India during the preceding Nanda Dynasty [难陀王朝]).*

When the Achaemenid and Maurya dynasties first emerged, the process of ***feudalization*** had not yet commenced; even the private ownership of land was insufficiently developed.

The rationale sustaining the premature existence of these ***early classical empires*** (早期古典帝国) has been hypothesized previously regarding centralized power: namely, **the exploitation of cities and commerce.** Although the surviving historical materials from that era are exceedingly scarce today, the limited content we possess undeniably corroborates this point.

The Maurya Dynasty attached monumental importance to the control of cities, establishing complex municipal systems for urban management and relying primarily on provincial capitals to project control over local regions. This regime forged a relatively sophisticated coinage system; various officially sanctioned coins were utilized for commerce, and trade with the external world was massively expanded. The Achaemenid Dynasty inherited the highly developed pre-existing trade networks of ***the Near East*** and pioneered a bimetallic (gold and silver) currency system.

Cultural characteristics laterally prove the paramount importance of commerce in the First Persian Empire. For instance, within the belief system of the ancient Persians, lying was deemed an atrociously extreme evil. In his inscriptions, Darius I (大流士一世) repeatedly emphasized that he never lied and severely punished enemies who did. Herodotus noted: *The Persians consider lying to be the most disgraceful act in the world, followed by owing debt, because a man in debt is inevitably bound to tell lies.*

This specific record allows people to deduce the true underlying reason why Persians harbored such a visceral hatred for lying: **Commerce occupied an absolutely foundational position within their entire society.** In ancient societies, logistics and transportation fundamentally could not be compared to the present. If a merchant acted dishonestly—such as trading heavily degraded, poor-quality goods—it was exceptionally difficult for the victim to defend their rights. After all, many trading partners might only meet once and never have the opportunity to cross paths again in their lifetimes. *(Mesopotamia has literally unearthed such clay tablets complaining about the dishonest commercial practices of partners—specifically the infamous Ea-nāsir copper complaint—which later even became a popular internet meme).*

If commercial behavior plays a paramount role in a society, and widespread dishonesty possesses the potential to shatter commercial networks, then it is not the least bit surprising that the society's ideology would hyper-emphasize the absolute sinfulness of lying.

The reasons why these empires could be established militarily can be attributed to superior geopolitical environments, the emergence of **Charismatic leaders** (卡里斯玛式领袖), and military innovations *(such as the utilization of Median cavalry by the Persians).*

This leaves only one lingering question: **How did these empires execute their rule over local territories?**

I contend the answer lies here: within the expansive territories of the Persian and Magadhan empires, tribes and ***communities*** still existed in massive abundance, constituting the absolute bedrock for local autonomy.

Whether under the Achaemenid Dynasty or the Maurya Dynasty, in remote regions far removed from the empire's core strongholds, local rulers nominally submitted to the empire but continued to govern their jurisdictions entirely according to their traditional methods. Their actual obligations to the imperial court were exceedingly limited.

The imperial rulers exhibited tolerance toward local religions and cultures, explicitly permitting local autonomy. **Rather than attributing this to the personal morality or ideology of the rulers, it is vastly more accurate to say that co-opting local tribes and *communities* into the state's political apparatus—strictly according to their original governance models—was the foundational bedrock upon which the empire's very existence was predicated.**

This was dictated by the fact that these **"*early classical empires*"** had not yet evolved into a ***genuine classical era***. The aristocrats, priests, and slaveowners who held dominant status in the ***early states*** (早期国家) had not yet decayed; ***feudal relations of production*** had not yet emerged; and there was a severe deficit of "non-productive bureaucrats" (脱产官僚) required for the state to execute direct governance over local regions. **Had there not been a colossal multitude of tribes and *communities* capable of governing themselves, the empire would have been utterly paralyzed and incapable of ruling.**

We note that a century prior to the rise of Persia, the Neo-Assyrian Empire (新亚述帝国) had already occupied vast swathes of ***the Near East*** through brutal military conquest. However, the Assyrian rulers absolutely did not appease the conquered regions like Cyrus the Great (居鲁士) later did, nor did they integrate the pre-existing local governance structures into their empire. On the contrary, the Assyrian rulers forcibly relocated the populations of conquered regions on a massive scale, deliberately obliterating local governance structures.

The ultimate consequence of this strategy was that once the Assyrian conquests reached their absolute zenith, the empire collapsed almost instantaneously upon turning on its heel (旋踵而亡).

Here, we observe a distinct characteristic on the eve of China's classical unification. Because China is a **primary civilization** (原生文明) with an excessively protracted history, the ***early states*** in the North had already been locked in mutual warfare and slaughter for a monumentally long time.

As mentioned previously, a glaring distinction of China during ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) was the pre-existence of the Western Zhou regime orchestrating this very process. In other words, when ***the Great Expansion*** commenced, a dominant state already reigned over the Yellow River basin. Furthermore, across Northern China *(and we can also include the regions between the Yangtze and Huai rivers /* 江淮之间*)*, there existed absolutely no impassable geographical barriers partitioning this territory of over a million square kilometers. Early Chinese civilization had already incubated a massive population. *(Though population figures from that era are undeniably difficult to verify, I have adopted a relatively compromised estimate: the population within the Western Zhou's domain basically equaled the combined populations of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt at the time, and likely exceeded it slightly as the Zhou expanded).*

The aforementioned factors forged a fascinating historical reality: in other regions, ***The Great Expansion*** generally manifested as a pioneering model driven by ethnic groups who had already mastered the utilization of iron tools. **In China, however, iron tools only participated in the latter half of *the Great Expansion*.** Throughout the entirety of the Western Zhou period, Huaxia conquerors (华夏族) were steadily carving out new colonial strongholds utilizing merely *bronze* tools.

This, to a significant extent, demonstrates that as the *only* **primary civilization** participating in ***the Great Expansion***, China was alarmingly, overwhelmingly "over-mature" (过于成熟了) in its state morphology and social structure compared to all other competitors on the track.

On the eve of the Chinese Empire's unification, the ubiquitous tribes and ***communities*** (社群) characteristic of ***early states*** had already been utterly pulverized and annihilated in the crucible of ceaseless, increasingly high-intensity warfare. Consequently, they fundamentally possessed no capacity to participate in the construction of state politics as autonomous local forces.

During the Warring States period (战国时期), the various vassal states began implementing the *Fengjun* system (封君制 / enfeoffment of lords). *(Here, "enfeoffed lords" refers to aristocrats possessing noble titles and fiefs, acting as vassals to the monarch).* However, this status quo was notoriously unstable. In the fifty years preceding Qin's unification, rebellions by enfeoffed lords within the Qin state had become cripplingly severe, and the situation in other vassal states was equally bleak. Enfeoffed lords of immense prestige could easily overshadow their kings—either monopolizing the state's administrative prerogatives (like Lord Chunshen / 春申君) or essentially

operating quasi-independent kingdoms (like Lord Mengchang / 孟尝君). Monarchs harbored profound insecurity when facing these formidable ministers (强臣), and the number of enfeoffed lords who managed to die a natural, peaceful death was vanishingly small. Evidently, this political model was chronically unstable.

When the Qin Dynasty (秦朝) first unified China, it was perhaps precisely out of profound anxiety regarding this *Fengjun* system that it stubbornly insisted on administrating the entire realm exclusively through the Commandery and County system (郡县制 / *Junxian* system). However, the sheer sheer number of available state officials absolutely could not support the voracious demands of such a colossal bureaucratic political machine; the intense hostility the conquered regions harbored toward the Qin rulers only catastrophically exacerbated this vulnerability.

The early Han Dynasty (汉朝初年) inherited this exact tension from the Warring States period. Although the absolute majority of the vassal kingdoms (诸侯王国) were ruled by imperial relatives of the Han house, the central court in Chang'an treated these kingdoms as existential hypothetical enemies for half a century. The court strictly prohibited population flows into the vassal kingdoms and deployed defensive military arrangements against them.

Therefore, we can assert that in China, several centuries *before* a distinct class succession could generate a sufficient volume of **non-productive bureaucrats** (脱产官僚), the tribes and ***communities*** capable of sustaining local autonomy had already withered and died. *(While it is impossible to estimate the exact timeline, they had undeniably vanished by the time the Warring States universally launched their legalist reforms).*

A glaring "window period" (空窗期 / political vacuum) emerged precisely in this gap.

Consequently, when China crossed the threshold into its ***classical era***, its social structure was phenomenally simpler than those of Iran and India. The empire's **"internal frontiers" (内部边疆)** had essentially been completely eradicated. China never witnessed the emergence of an **"*early classical empire*"**—one that heavily relied on cities and commercial circulation, while leaning on tribes and ***communities*** for autonomous local governance.

The entire society was fundamentally stripped of any buffer zones (缺乏缓冲); it functioned like a colossal yet pathologically hypersensitive machine.

Coupled with the fact that the volume of surviving ancient literature in China is indeed astronomically larger than in other regions, the transitional characteristics of the ***classical empire***

became glaringly magnified, and the bureaucratic system of China's ***classical era*** proved to be unprecedentedly formidable and draconian.

11, The Striking Similarities Between Rome and China

Here, Rome and China share a substantial degree of similarity. In the process of Rome transforming the Mediterranean into its internal lake, the tribes and ***communities*** (社群) capable of maintaining local autonomy within its borders were significantly fewer compared to those in Persia and India.

By this period, the highly developed civilizational regions of the Eastern Mediterranean had already endured centuries of successful or unsuccessful rule by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Macedonians, and the Diadochi (马其顿的继业者们). Peaceful or violent interactions had already severely pulverized the existence of tribes and ***communities*** here.

For example, in Egypt, unlike previous conquerors of Egypt who seamlessly assumed the title of Pharaoh, the Roman Princeps (罗马元首) absolutely did not hold the title of Pharaoh; thereafter, there were never any Pharaohs again, and Egypt's political and cultural independence further collapsed. Another famous example is that the Romans initially fostered the Kingdom of Judea (犹太王国) in the Canaan region as a vassal state. However, as Rome entered ***the zenith of its classical society*** (古典社会鼎盛时期), the Roman Empire gradually abolished Jewish autonomy through a series of hard and soft measures, directly annexing the entire Judean region into provinces for administration.

Western Europe, on the other hand, was far too backward; given the local levels of social development, it was exceedingly difficult to even establish autonomous political organizations within the empire *(a situation remarkably similar to Southern China)*.

In fact, one can distinctly observe that the complexity and coercive power of Rome's bureaucratic system were glaringly superior to those of the ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) in Iran and India. It could absolutely rival the bureaucratic system of the Han Empire, exchanging blows on equal footing. For instance, in the judicial domain, the perfection and efficacy of the Roman Empire's bureaucracy were highly likely superior to those of the Han Dynasty. *(That Rome's bureaucracy was phenomenally formidable is practically a tautology that needs no elaboration; for if it were not strong, what possible reason could there be for the Byzantine Empire to survive another entire millennium after* ***feudalization*** *commenced?)*

Equally similar to China, the transition of social stages occurring in Rome during the ***classical period*** materialized earlier and far more conspicuously than in Iran and India.

The most representative exemplar of this is the Equestrian order (*Equites* / 骑士阶层) bridging the Republic and the Empire. Although this class existed as the second-highest social tier in Roman society *(classified by property standards)*, its status was by no means immutable. For instance, during the transition from the Republic to the Imperial Principate (元首制), the Equestrian order massively filled administrative and military positions within the empire, most notably as Praetorian Prefects (禁卫军长官) and in key posts overseeing taxation.

According to the Roman historian Tacitus (塔西陀), the Roman Princeps deliberately elevated the Equestrian order precisely to counterbalance the Senate (元老院). This unequivocally demonstrates that such social class succession was likely an open secret back then. From the late Republic to the early Principate, the Equestrian order spawned a cohort of brilliant scholars, military commanders, administrative officials, and politicians, including Cicero (西塞罗), Pliny the Elder (老普林尼), Pliny the Younger (小普林尼), and Pompey (庞培).

As ***feudalization*** (封建化) progressed, the Equestrian order gradually evolved during the Imperial period into a ***stratum*** dominated by the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级).

In the 1st century AD, as the economic returns of the slavery economy plummeted and the sources of slaves dwindled, the *Colonatus* system (隶农制) began to flourish. Ideologies critiquing slavery *(such as those championed by the philosopher Seneca /* 塞涅卡*)* and demands to partially replace slavery with the tenancy system *(such as those of the agronomist Columella /* 科卢梅拉*)* began to emerge.

With the massive expansion of the *coloni* (隶农) population and a substantial improvement in the living conditions of the remaining slaves, the exaction of land rent effectively supplanted forced labor as the primary mode of exploitation, and familial labor replaced collective labor. **This was the absolute prelude to *feudalization.***

Judging from key phenomena such as the external manifestation of class succession, the development of tenancy relations (租佃关系), and the later rise of the ***manorial economy*** (庄园经济), the historical developmental trajectory of Han Dynasty China was slightly ahead of Rome. However, this lead should not exceed two centuries—a gap that was hardly significant in that era.

Numerous reasons can explain this disparity. China's social structure was simpler than that of the Roman world *(Rome at least retained the influence of city-state traditions, whereas city-state life and merchant burghers had severely decayed in China long before the Qin and Han periods; from another perspective, this also reflects China's longer historical development)*.

China's population was far more concentrated than Rome's *(assuming both empires possessed roughly equal populations at their zenith, estimated between 60 and 70 million, China's densely populated zones were contiguous and concentrated in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, whereas Rome's population was dispersed around the Mediterranean)*.

Furthermore, the increasingly high-intensity warfare during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods violently accelerated technological innovations and applications *(such as iron weapons and agricultural tools)* and stimulated societal reforms *(although the warfare records of the Warring States period inevitably contain massive exaggerations, even if we discount the recorded military figures by half, the intensity of the wars remains staggeringly high)*.

I wish to add a crucial point here: Many people believe that the wars of the Warring States period birthed a destructive bureaucratic system. **I absolutely reject this notion.**

First, up until the Qin Dynasty unified China, the Chinese bureaucratic system was not in the least bit perfected; it completely lacked even a relatively mature system for selecting officials. Otherwise, how could the Qin Dynasty have collapsed a mere dozen years after its unification? Second, as internal annexation wars within the civilized world on the eve of imperial unification, the wars of the Warring States period were not particularly unique in terms of their military mobilization ratios. They were not necessarily superior to the mobilization demonstrated by the Roman Republic during the Second Punic War (第二次布匿战争).

In terms of sheer brutality, while the Qin army's slaughter of prisoners of war was undeniably bloody, Rome's total annihilation of Carthage was hardly any better. However, the mobilization ratio of the **"Total War" (**总体战**)** launched by the Han Dynasty as a massive empire during the Han-Xiongnu Wars and its expansionist campaigns was genuinely astronomically astonishing for the pre-modern era.

Additionally, one can also observe differences in specific details. After all, it is impossible for the political systems, historical trajectories, and geographical environments of the two empires to be perfectly identical.

For instance, when Rome transitioned from the zenith of its slavery economy to a feudal economy, it did not experience a period characterized by a massive population of independent yeomen (自耕农), unlike China's ***classical empire***. Rome's abundance of independent yeomen existed *prior* to the

explosive rise of its slavery economy. Rome's expansion brought prosperity to the slavery system, whereas the expansion of the Qin and Han empires consolidated ***feudal economic relations*** (封建经济关系). Furthermore, the Chinese empires deliberately manufactured independent yeomen in newly conquered territories through "border colonization with migrants" (移民实边)—a policy exceptionally conspicuous during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝).

An overwhelmingly autocratic ruler like Emperor Wu of Han would directly employ ruthless political means to crush large estate owners (大地产者). Roman rulers had no necessity to do this, nor could they necessarily achieve it even if they tried.

Nevertheless, regardless of whatever detailed discrepancies existed between the historical trajectories of the East and the West, the macro-historical progression up until the collapse of the ***classical empires*** remained fundamentally identical.

12, Why the Feudalization Process in China Abruptly Accelerated During the Han Dynasty

However, after China experienced the combined 70-year rule of Emperor Wu (汉武帝) and Huo Guang (霍光), its historical progression accelerated phenomenally, and certain measures implemented then later proved to be absolutely decisive.

In fact, much like the scenario in Japan, although relatively long periods are broadly classified as ***classical empires*** (古典帝国), we must look at the true essence of **class transition**. If we strictly define the "most typical" ***classical society*** (古典社会) as the specific epoch where the supreme ruler promotes and demotes officials "unconventionally" from all social classes and strata—ignoring explicit regulations or tacit rules, violently enforcing personal will, and filling the imperial bureaucracy with factions of divergent identities, ideologies, and demands to consolidate monarchical power—**then this specific historical stage in China was actually remarkably brief.**

It essentially lasted merely half a century under Emperor Wu's reign, which is even shorter than Japan's *Insei* (院政 / Cloistered Rule) period. *(Huo Guang, as a regent, inherently lacked the absolute conditions to arbitrarily appoint officials like a classical monarch; moreover, the prominent officials during his regency had mostly already emerged during Emperor Wu's reign).*

Prior to this, imperial officials were overwhelmingly the descendants of meritorious ministers (功臣之后). After this, regardless of whether they acquired office through hereditary privilege (恩荫) or selection, officials were fundamentally of ***bureaucratized landlord*** (官僚化地主) origins. *(Of*

course, this could not be absolute; Emperor Xuan of Han would also heavily rely on friends from his commoner days, such as Dai Changle [戴长乐]. Yet, even Eastern Han scholars themselves conceded that "the Han's acquisition of talent reaching its zenith" strictly applied only to Emperor Wu's reign). By the Eastern Han Dynasty, the monopolization of power by the **aristocratic great clans** (门阀士族) became glaringly conspicuous, and officials from humble origins (寒门) were exceedingly rare.

It was precisely amidst such violent mutations that certain essential characteristics dictating the bureaucratic system of the Chinese Empire emerged, ultimately culminating in the restoration of a ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家). Considering the astonishing scale of military conquests during Emperor Wu's reign, **it is no exaggeration whatsoever to assert that China's bureaucratic system initially originated as a "wartime system" (战时体制).**

From the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty onwards, the ***manorial economy*** (庄园经济) seized the lion's share of the national economy, and the contraction of currency circulation became glaringly obvious. During the warlord chaos at the end of the Eastern Han, the **feudal** consciousness exhibited by various separatist factions was already exceptionally pronounced, and this phenomenon was entirely nationwide. At this point, a mere three centuries had elapsed since the death of Emperor Wu.

Conversely, counting 300 years forward from Rome's zenith, the Western Roman Empire had not yet officially collapsed, while the Eastern Roman Empire survived tenaciously, and its ***degree of feudalization*** (封建化程度) remained relatively low.

*(Although people routinely compare the Southern Dynasties following the "Crossing of the River by the Gentry" [衣冠南渡] to the Eastern Roman Empire, the two were fundamentally different in nature. When the Eastern Roman Empire was established, it was in a nascent state of **feudalization**. However, what transpired in the Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties was fundamentally no different from the North; it was merely another form of re-bureaucratization [再官僚化].*

*In fact, anyone familiar with the history of our Three Kingdoms period would easily realize that the Eastern Wu [东吴] regime was highly likely the most **feudalized** among the three separatist states. This is glaringly evident from Eastern Wu's military system [e.g., the Buqu / 世兵部曲制]. Logically, this is exceptionally coherent: the massive development of the southern regions during the Han Dynasties basically occurred after the bureaucratic system had matured under Emperor Wu. The **landlord class**, having rapidly infiltrated the state apparatus, spearheaded the*

*development of the South. Coupled with the reality that "Heaven is high and the Emperor is far away" [天高皇帝远], it is not the least bit surprising that **feudalization** developed so rapidly there.)*

Therefore, we can deduce several core reasons why China's ***feudalization*** proceeded at such breakneck speed from the mid-Western Han to the late Eastern Han periods.

First, although the primary foreign trade corridors of China had been fully pioneered during Emperor Wu's reign, China's location at the extreme eastern terminus of the Eurasian landmass dictated that its international trade fundamentally could not be as hyper-developed as that of ***the Near East***. Relative to China's own colossal economic mass, this trade volume was even more negligible.

It is international economic activity—not domestic economic activity—that serves as the crucial factor counteracting *feudalization*. This is because domestic economic activity will inherently contract as ***feudalization*** progresses, and the central government's control over the domestic economy will proportionally decay. Conversely, international trade concentrates at a few specific nodes, making it phenomenally easier for the imperial court to extract lucrative profits. The microscopically small proportion of international trade within the overall economy meant that China's ***feudalization*** process possessed absolutely zero buffer space.

Second, although from a holistic perspective, there was no era where China secured a commanding global lead in overall science and technology, **during the Han Dynasty—specifically the two centuries spanning the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD—the advancements achieved in iron and steel metallurgy were breathtakingly staggering.**

The puddling process (炒钢法), the co-fusion steelmaking process (灌钢法), the utilization of coal, hydraulic blast bellows (水力鼓风机 / *shuipai*), and blast furnaces (高炉炼铁) emerged in a concentrated burst. China instantaneously forged a massive, unbridgeable chasm in both the quality and output of iron and steel compared to the rest of the world. Initially, this was highly likely the result of centralized state management over metallurgy driven by military and economic imperatives; it cannot be ruled out that the Han government injected colossal capital investments into this sector.

The widespread popularization of iron tools potently elevated ***productive forces***. Moreover, the Han Empire—particularly under Emperor Wu—relentlessly prioritized leveraging state power to popularize new agricultural techniques. Within merely a century following Emperor Wu's death, China's population nearly doubled. Regardless of how much China lagged behind the Mediterranean world in engineering, mathematics, and philosophy, **it undeniably and abruptly seized a commanding lead in agricultural *productive forces*.** Consequently, the rapid consolidation of ***feudal relations of production*** (封建生产关系) was not the least bit surprising.

Third, the reform of the bureaucratic system massively facilitated the integration of the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) into state politics, empowering them to rapidly amass wealth.

As for Emperor Wu himself, although he holistically favored cultivating rich peasant-landlords and developing ***feudal relations of production***, his ultimate objective was to expropriate maximum revenue, grain, and manpower for his wars. When establishing the Regional Inspectors (刺史), the *Six Articles of Inspecting Commanderies* (六条察郡之法) he executed ruthlessly struck at local magnates (豪强) annexing land and local officials colluding with them. He also deliberately implemented the "law of geographical avoidance" (籍贯回避制度). This explicitly indicates that Emperor Wu personally recognized that ***feudalization*** would initially severely cripple state capacity.

However, all of this proved ultimately futile. Just as Emperor Wu firmly monopolized supreme decision-making power through the "Inner Court" (内朝)—while extensively recruiting talent from all echelons of society—this Inner Court, operating as a continuation of the classical imperial court, vanished swiftly after Huo Guang's death. Once a bureaucratic system was established that overwhelmingly advantaged the ***landlord class*** in monopolizing state power (as a distinct class), it was entirely inevitable that the ***landlord class*** would parasitize this system to reap profits for themselves. Let alone the reality that it was impossible for every subsequent emperor to possess the boundless energy and razor-sharp intellect of Emperor Wu.

Fourth, following Emperor Wu's reign, the Chinese Empire established absolute supremacy in this relatively isolated world of ***East Asia*** *(which also includes Northern Asia and portions of* ***Southeast Asia****; Xinjiang is included in* ***East Asia*** *as it is part of our nation's territory).* The empire had expanded to its absolute physical limits; there existed zero foreign powers capable of posing an existential challenge to the empire, and the Han people grew thoroughly accustomed to this hegemony.

Domestically, large-scale tribes, ***communities*** (社群), and **"internal frontiers"** only survived in the recently pacified South *(of course, "recently" is relative to the Yellow River basin, the mainstream core of Chinese civilization)*; however, they had vanished entirely from the empire's core ruling zones. Furthermore, ethnic groups like the Baiyue (百越) and Baipu (百濮) were simply too overwhelmingly weak compared to the coalescing Han ethnicity. Meanwhile, the ethnic minorities operating along the northern frontiers spent two entire centuries trembling in terror under the overwhelming martial superiority of the Han Dynasty.

All these factors dictated that during the 1st century BC, and the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, the geopolitical reality confronting the Chinese Empire was actually exceedingly singular. *(Of course, in a sense, it wasn't inherently singular; it only became extraordinarily singular because Emperor Wu had annihilated and crushed an excessively massive multitude of enemies).* Under these

conditions, within the isolated world China inhabited, there existed absolutely zero external forces capable of obstructing China's ***feudalization*** process.

13, Why the Political Reforms During Emperor Wu's Reign Ultimately Led China Down a Catastrophic Path

However, as I have previously articulated as my most paramount conclusion: although China progressed rapidly during early ***feudalization*** (封建化), this can hardly be deemed a good thing. The bureaucratic system forged during the Western Han Dynasty ultimately mutated into a force that obstructed ***feudalization***, triggering its disruption and leading to a catastrophic ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚复辟).

Previously, I merely stated in broad strokes that the bureaucratic system formed in the Han Dynasty was "too strong," without specifying *how* it was strong. Furthermore, merely using the word "strong" might invite misinterpretation.

Therefore, let us return to the historical turning point and meticulously investigate the **"crime scene" (**案发现场**)**. Although Emperor Wu's 54-year reign holistically constitutes the turning point in Chinese history, for the sake of granular scrutiny, we might as well narrow the timeframe specifically to the two years between 121 BC and 120 BC. Let us observe the crossroads at which the Han Dynasty stood at this exact juncture.

First, Huo Qubing's (霍去病) two offensives in 121 BC enabled the Han Dynasty to conquer the entire Hexi Corridor (河西走廊). The encirclement of the Han Dynasty by peripheral minority regimes like the Xiongnu completely disintegrated. Following the conquest of the Hexi Corridor, the Han Empire's control over the North reached the absolute maximum extent achievable by subsequent dynasties. Regions suitable for agriculture were entirely occupied, and certain mixed agro-pastoral zones and horse-breeding pastures were secured.

Second, following the failed rebellion of Liu An, the Prince of Huainan (淮南王刘安), in 122 BC, Emperor Wu successively promulgated the *Law of Left Officialdom* (左官律) and the *Law of Appended Benefits* (附益法). This unequivocally marked the completion of the usurpation of the rights of the vassal kingdoms. Thereafter, it was fundamentally impossible for the Han imperial court to extract any further lucrative resources from the vassal kingdoms.

Third, Emperor Wu established the Imperial Academy (太学) in 124 BC. This, combined with previous measures such as establishing the Erudites of the Five Classics (五经博士) and perfecting

the *Chaju* system (察举制 / recommendation system), basically completed the construction of the ideological framework *(primarily Confucian)* of the Chinese bureaucratic system. This framework, holistically speaking, persisted uninterrupted until the late Qing Dynasty.

Fourth, following the Hexi campaigns, the surplus wealth accumulated during the reigns of Emperors Wen and Jing had been virtually exhausted by the Xiongnu wars. Continuing the war inevitably meant pioneering new sources of revenue. Achieving this in the short term could absolutely not rely on the organic growth of ***productive forces***; it had to rely on **a novel, extractive institutional mechanism (**新的榨取制度**)**.

By this point, the successful counteroffensive against the Xiongnu meant the empire no longer faced an existential crisis. A monumental strategic dilemma thus arose *(judged from our modern perspective with comprehensive information)*: Should the empire transition into a state of defensive counterattack at geographical positions relatively close to the hinterland—zones situated at the ecological boundaries of precipitation and production modes—using its residual strength to sweep peripheral regimes? Or should it seize the moment when the Xiongnu were severely crippled to proactively expand the war, dispatching even larger armies deep into the Mongolian heartland to relentlessly pursue a fleeing enemy?

However, at the time, people seemingly did not lean toward making peace. This was not merely because the information available back then was incomplete, but more critically because a century of crushing military oppression by the Xiongnu made it exceedingly difficult for people to believe that the Xiongnu armies would not stage a devastating comeback. After all, when Modu Chanyu (冒顿单于) commenced his conquests, the Hetao region and the Hexi Corridor were not ruled by the Xiongnu either.

At that specific juncture, the only official who resolutely advocated for "quitting while ahead" and restoring peace with the Xiongnu was the Chief Commandant of Nobility, Ji An (主爵都尉汲黯). Yet, this man did not necessarily foresee any systemic crisis; highly likely, it was simply because he consistently revered the Daoist principle of "minimizing state interference" (国家少事), and felt that after winning a few battles, negotiating peace was merely more appropriate. In summary, the empire's ultimate decision was to relentlessly expand the war, its final objective potentially already having evolved into the absolute annihilation of the Xiongnu.

Consequently, following the death of Gongsun Hong (公孙弘) in 121 BC—the very last Chancellor (丞相) within the core decision-making circle during Emperor Wu's reign—until Tian Qianqiu (田千秋) was summoned to assist the crown prince Liu Fuling, the historical records show **absolutely no Chancellor of the Han Empire playing any substantive role in the decision-making echelon.**

This marked the absolute segregation of the "Inner Court" (内朝) and the "Outer Court" (外朝). Now, the classical imperial court—teeming with eccentric talents and exotic advisors from all walks of life—contracted into the Inner Court, headed by the Commander-in-Chief and General-in-Chief, Wei Qing (大司马大将军卫青). Members of the Inner Court, acting as the emperor's intimate confidants, directly participated in the deliberation and decision-making process of grand national strategies. Meanwhile, the Outer Court bureaucracy, headed by the Chancellor, did not play any influential role in political decision-making, existing merely as the executive apparatus of the imperial government.

This novel institutional apparatus rapidly demonstrated an aggressively formidable working efficiency. Over the ensuing decade, Emperor Wu executed two predatory currency reforms, ultimately standardizing the currency and monopolizing the right of coinage. He launched the *Suanmin* and *Gaomin* campaigns (算缗和告缗运动)—a terrifying movement of "national informant snitching" (全民检举揭发) that **utterly bankrupted all merchants from the middle class upwards.** He initiated the policies of state monopoly over salt and iron (盐铁官营) and the *Pingzhun* and *Junshu* systems (平准均输 / equitable delivery and price stabilization), drastically fortifying the state's capacity to control the economy.

It was precisely through these draconian measures to alleviate economic pressure that Emperor Wu was able to sustain his wars of conquest and exploratory expeditions for another 30 years, marking the very first time China appeared on the world stage as a formidable superpower.

Thus, we can explicitly unravel how Emperor Wu's political maneuvers meticulously sculpted the characteristics that ultimately enabled the restoration of the Chinese bureaucratic system.

First, unlike any other nation, the Chinese Empire during Emperor Wu's reign developed a bureaucratic system that was unprecedentedly unique. It possessed a heavily defined guiding ideology (Confucianism); it featured a massive array of both public and private academies, alongside state-sanctioned scholars and prestigious Great Confucians (大儒) responsible for cultivating the bureaucracy's reserve force; and it utilized a relatively explicit official-selection system that the bureaucracy possessed substantial authority to execute autonomously *(though the highest-ranking officials naturally still required imperial approval).* **Crucially, this system encompassed the entire nation, not merely fragmented regions.**

For one or two of these characteristics to appear in isolation is not unusual, but for all of them to converge simultaneously within the bureaucratic system of a ***classical period*** (古典时期) is genuinely astonishing.

The general characteristics of a ***classical empire's*** bureaucratic system lie precisely in its *arbitrariness* and *balance*. That is to say, it does not exclusively select one specific type of person; the ultimate result is a system brimming with a staggering diversity of personnel. It is not a religious order (教团); it is a state apparatus wielding immense power. Given the prosperity and openness of myriad ideologies during the ***classical period***, the intellectual inclinations of the members within a ***classical bureaucratic system*** should naturally be highly diverse.

Furthermore, we must point out that under normal circumstances, maintaining this diversity within the bureaucratic system is actually phenomenally beneficial for the **absolute despotic power** (独断专行的权力) of the monarch. For instance, the monarchs of Sasanian Persia (萨珊波斯) were extraordinarily fond of—and highly adept at—expanding their own power by pitting Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, various Christian sects, and the Mazdakite movement against one another in fierce competition. Similarly, the monarchs of the Maurya and Gupta Dynasties simultaneously patronized Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and the Ajivika (阿吉维卡派) sect.

The subsequent trajectory of Chinese history also proves that establishing Confucianism as the exclusive state ideology (独尊儒术) fundamentally *did not* increase the monarch's actual power in practice. Following Emperor Wu, the power of Han monarchs relative to the bureaucratic system did not exhibit an upward trajectory; on the contrary, it trended toward weakness. This is because a bureaucratic system operating under a unified guiding ideology was never originally designed to enhance the power of a classical monarch. **Rather, confronted with the brutal realities of relentlessly expanding warfare, it was designed to maximize administrative execution efficiency and to conserve the phenomenal energy the emperor personally expended on maintaining daily administration.**

The "Outer Court" (外朝) bureaucratic system during Emperor Wu's reign functioned effectively as the **exoskeleton** (外骨骼) of the entire imperial government. For this appended machine to operate normally and autonomously—without constantly plunging into a state requiring manual repair—the emperor had to input the "software program" of Confucian ideology into it.

However, a bureaucratic system possessing a guiding ideology, academic institutions, and explicit promotional pathways inevitably spawns a novel mutation: **the awakening of a "self-consciousness" (自我意识) from within the bureaucracy.** Multitudes of bureaucrats recognized that they shared monumental common interests, and from the perspective of official selection and performance evaluations, this was undeniably true.

Concurrently, a massive demographic of beneficiaries wholly parasitic upon this bureaucratic system emerged. In reality, this occurred almost immediately following Emperor Wu's death—

namely, the emergence of the Han Dynasty's "families of classical scholarship" (经学世家). The reason certain Great Confucians were deeply revered was not due to the actual practical utility of their scholarship, but simply because studying under their tutelage made it phenomenally easier to secure an official post. This was driven not only by academic pedigree but, more importantly, by social networking (社交关系).

Ultimately, these dependents of the bureaucratic system coalesced into a highly specialized ***stratum*** within our nation: ***the Scholar-official stratum*** **(**士大夫阶层**).**

Under these circumstances, **safeguarding the very existence of the bureaucratic system itself**—rather than merely utilizing the bureaucracy to expropriate wealth and land—mutated into the fundamental core interest of a significant segment of the population. This differs radically from Rome. Although Rome possessed a highly developed bureaucratic system, when individuals sought promotion within that system, they were overwhelmingly thinking about accumulating more wealth and purchasing more estates for their own families. They were merely riding the tide within the system and possessed zero burning desire to actively safeguard the existing institutional structure.

Since China's bureaucratic system boasted a massive cohort of vested interests defending it, possessed relatively broad mutual identification among its members, and wielded substantial autonomous operational capacity, whenever it faced monumental historical shifts, it possessed both the inexhaustible motivation and the lethal capability to react swiftly and effectively—ensuring its own adaptation, survival, and ultimate dominance.

Second, the greatest characteristic of the bureaucratic system forged during Emperor Wu's reign was not its "capacity to govern," but its **"capacity to plunder" (**能抢**).** This is a critical reality that many people—especially foreigners—easily overlook.

Contemporary perceptions of the Chinese bureaucratic system frequently operate under the illusion that it is highly complex, mature, and omnipotent. But this is, in fact, a pure fantasy. My evaluation is simple: live in China for a few years, and you will understand perfectly.

One merely needs to contrast Rome with the Han Dynasty to readily realize this point. In terms of the professionalization and microscopic refinement of its bureaucratic apparatus, the Han Dynasty was fundamentally incapable of comparing with Rome. This is entirely natural; after all, the civilizational development of the Eastern Mediterranean spanned a vastly longer timeframe than China's, and interactions between various regions there were phenomenally frequent. For instance, regarding jurisprudence, auditing, and public works, Rome conspicuously possessed an overwhelming advantage over the Han Empire. If we assess the deep intervention into socio-economics, the Romans were highly likely far more comprehensive and thorough.

Of course, one should not forget that it is impossible for us to accurately compare the relative strength of ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) between two massive ***classical empire***s. This is because even within a single empire, the court's power over different regions varies significantly. For instance, the granting of Roman citizenship remained regional for a long period; one could not possibly expect the Roman Empire's ***infrastructural power*** in the Italian Peninsula to be equal to that in its various provinces. The Han Dynasty is a similar case, as the political tasks assigned to different commanderies (*Jun* / 郡) could differ vastly.

Overall, however, the ***infrastructural power*** commanded by both the Han and Roman Empires was quite astonishing. Emperor Wu of Han's ability to conduct long-term, effective military mobilizations and expansionist wars during his reign over China was entirely inseparable from the formidable ***infrastructural power*** controlled by the imperial government. If relying solely on ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) were enough to defeat a formidable enemy like the Xiongnu, then Emperor Chongzhen (of the late Ming Dynasty) would never have ended up hanging himself on Jingshan (景山).

The point I wish to convey here is that the institutional reforms (*Genghua* / 更化) during Emperor Wu's lengthy reign paved the way for the formation of a highly destructive bureaucratic system capable of providing immense ***despotic power***. Although, as we will soon see, Liu Che (Emperor Wu) himself was consistently, cautiously, and wisely concealing this ***despotic power***.

However, during that highly specific historical epoch of Emperor Wu's reign, **the primary mission of the bureaucratic system was absolutely not "capacity to govern"; it was "capacity to plunder".** This was because the supreme objective of the empire was to win the war.

Recall when we previously mentioned how the Qing Dynasty, after conquering China, absorbed the harsh lessons of the Ming emperors. The Qing deliberately utilized the Eight Banners system (八旗)—an apparatus they already possessed upon "***Entering the Pass***" (入关)—to explicitly separate ordinary administrative officials from specialized officials tasked with expanding and safeguarding the monarch's personal interests. This historical fact is monumental. **It proves that certain bureaucratic systems are inherently designed with a primary objective that has absolutely nothing to do with "enhancing governance"**—despite the general assumption that officials exist to "manage."

When Emperor Wu designed this institutional apparatus, his primary consideration was undeniably not how to ensure the impartial adjudication of judicial cases. Instead, his sole focus was on **how to systematically and continuously expropriate civilian wealth on a massive scale to fuel his wars.**

A bureaucratic system forged under such motives will inevitably mutate into an ***extractive bureaucratic system*** **(**榨取型官僚制度**)** rather than a ***governance-oriented bureaucratic system*** **(**治理型官僚制度**).** When we associate this with the classification of officials during the Qing Dynasty, we realize that, in essence, specialized bureaucrats tasked with expanding the monarch's wealth and specialized bureaucrats tasked with safeguarding the monarch's political security belong to the exact same category: they are purely **"servant-type" (**仆人型**)**.

Therefore, when the ***classical period*** passed and China genuinely no longer needed to confront foreign wars on the astronomical scale and intensity of the Han-Xiongnu Wars, this ***extractive bureaucratic system*** effortlessly mutated into an ***oppressive bureaucratic system*** **(**压迫型官僚制度**)**—transforming into a monolithic apparatus whose primary objective was maintaining stability and suffocating all mutations.

In fact, it is exceptionally easy for people to comprehend this logic: **the most potent instrument of oppression is extraction itself.** As long as the common people are kept sufficiently destitute and ignorant, they are fundamentally incapable of posing any threat. This is exactly what the *Book of Lord Shang* (商君书) pointed out 2,300 years ago.

Precisely because the entire bureaucratic system is predatory rather than governance-oriented, the pathological hyper-expansion of this bureaucracy can directly annihilate social production—**this is the true root cause of the so-called "Dynastic Cycle" (**历史周期率 / 王朝周期律**).** If one is familiar with the subsequent history of the Chinese Empire, particularly the history of the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) since the Sui and Tang dynasties, this becomes glaringly obvious.

Regarding the state apparatus's capacity to manage the grassroots of society, the Chinese Empire was not necessarily superior to any other region; it might not have even surpassed ***medieval*** feudal Europe. When confronted with judicial cases, was there a procedure that could genuinely satisfy the entire society? When drafting financial budgets and conducting audits, was there an explicit process to establish accountability? Were there highly efficient market management departments to regulate the economy and stimulate market vitality?

The truth is, the Chinese Empire neither could accomplish these things nor did it care about them in the slightest. It was never designed to solve social problems; its sole requirement was the capacity to endlessly expropriate the blood and sweat of the people (掠夺民脂民膏) while simultaneously preventing rebellions. That was entirely sufficient.

Numerous folk sayings in China reflect this profound realization, such as *"Beat both sides fifty times with the heavy bamboo"* (各打五十大板 / punishing the innocent and guilty indiscriminately) and *"The yamen gates open toward the south; if you have a righteous cause but no money, do not enter."* (衙门口朝南开，有理没钱莫进来). Even today, a highly popular internet idiom in the Chinese cybersphere perfectly encapsulates this: **"If you can't solve the problem, solve the person who raised the problem." (**解决不了问题就解决提出问题的人**).**

Regarding the true essence of our nation's bureaucratic system: it absolutely does not seek the long-term development of the nation or strive to do "good deeds." Instead, it seeks to plunder as much as humanly possible, committing "evil deeds." **Its formidable power lies in destruction, not construction; its mechanism is to terrorize the people, not to convince them.**

We must concede that this specific choice made by the Chinese Empire perfectly aligns with the fundamental logic of politics. For rulers to force the ruled into submission, there are essentially only three methods: bestowing favors to co-opt them, applying punishments to terrorize them, and implementing moral instruction to convince them. Rewarding requires construction, convincing requires facts, **but punishing carries the absolute lowest cost.** Rather than expending monumental effort to make the people genuinely submit with joy and admiration (心悦诚服), it is infinitely easier to manufacture endless terror and drive them all utterly insane with fear.

I firmly believe that anyone who has lived in China for a period of time—and still retains the capacity for independent thought—would find it impossible to believe that contemporary China genuinely surpasses Western developed nations in the realm of public services. *(One merely needs to recall the attitude they are subjected to when handling affairs at public institutions to immediately understand this).*

The genesis of such catastrophic consequences stems precisely from the fact that this institutional apparatus was *never* a regular governance system established by Emperor Wu; it was a **"wartime system"** (战时体制) forcefully erected because there were simply no other options available in that era. As mentioned previously, the emperor himself was equally hesitant regarding the extent to which this system should be executed and when it should be curtailed. Ultimately, however, his megalomaniacal ambition to utterly obliterate the Xiongnu triumphed over all other rational judgments.

After the ***classical period*** concluded *(with the onset of **feudalization**)*, massive-scale conflicts like the Han-Xiongnu Wars could fundamentally no longer be waged. All conquerable territories had been thoroughly annexed into the empire's pocket. There was no longer any necessity to dispatch countless explorers into the unknown distance to seek alliances, nor were there myriad grand engineering projects requiring monumental investment. In short, the colossal wealth extracted by the state had nowhere left to go.

Yet, the bureaucratic system persisted in *"plucking every last ounce of wealth"* (取之尽锱铢) from the people.

Therefore, as is glaringly evident today, the inevitable consequence was this: from the emperor at the absolute zenith down to the lowliest clerks at the grassroots, everyone acquired astronomical privileges strictly dictated by their hierarchical gradations within the bureaucratic system—and they uniformly coalesced to safeguard this exact apparatus.

As an ordinary individual, although I find it phenomenally difficult to fathom the sheer magnitude of the privileges wielded by the monarch and high-ranking bureaucrats, the undeniable historical reality is that these privileges have proven to be an absolutely irresistible temptation across the entirety of Chinese history. Anyone—regardless of their origins, their identity, or the specific modalities of their rise to power—the moment they secure such privileges, will exhaust every conceivable method to perpetuate the bureaucratic system and fiercely clutch onto their bureaucratic privileges. This is especially true under the terrifying reality that dismantling the bureaucratic system would inevitably provoke the monolithic, unified backlash of the already coalesced ***bureaucratized landlord class*** (官僚化的地主阶级).

No matter how spectacularly triumphant the counteroffensive against the Xiongnu appears both then and now, and no matter how blindingly dazzling the radiance of the Han Dynasty at its absolute zenith was, the "wartime bureaucratic system" forged during Emperor Wu's reign ultimately doomed the entire nation, dragging it down a one-way path straight to hell.

And now, it is simply too late to say anything.

14, The Imperative to Differentiate Between Infrastructural Power and Despotic Power, and Their Divergent Historical Trajectories

There is another paramount issue that must be elucidated here: people's intuitive perception of power frequently deviates from the actual reality, which can easily lead to profound historical misguidance.

I believe that the categorization of state power proposed by the British sociologist Michael Mann is immensely significant. The first type of power is translated as ***Despotic power*** **(**专制性权力**)**. It refers to the range of actions the state and its elites are empowered to undertake without the necessity of routine, institutionalized negotiation with various groups in civil society. Essentially, it is the power of state elites elevating themselves absolutely above civil society.

The second type of power is translated as ***Infrastructural power*** **(**基础性权力**)**. It refers to the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society and to logically and effectively implement political decisions throughout its entire territorial domain. It is the power of the state to penetrate

and centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through its own foundational infrastructures. *(Naturally, in our context, we are obviously not merely considering a modern "civil society," but extending this concept to encompass all ruled populations from antiquity to the present).*

When people observe a regime—especially an ancient regime that vanished long ago—their attention is effortlessly monopolized by its ***despotic power***. This is because the actions of monarchs and imperial courts exercising ***despotic power*** are spectacular and easily recorded. Conversely, illuminating the actual state of ***infrastructural power*** requires piecing together the myriad, informal fragments of daily social life, often relying on obscure documentary records or unearthed artifacts. Because this information is highly fragmented, it is exceedingly prone to being overlooked.

For instance, when we observe the ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) across the Eurasian landmass, we can discover that the ***classical bureaucratic systems*** of both Han Dynasty China and Rome during the Principate period were light-years ahead of Persia, India, and the Khmer Empire in terms of complexity and maturity. Yet, bizarrely, the Chinese Emperor and the Roman Princeps seemingly lacked the aura of sheer despotic majesty. They were rarely deified to extreme degrees; they were not revered as the *Chakravartin* (转轮圣王 / Wheel-turning Monarch) or the *Devaraja* (神王 / God-King), nor did they proclaim to possess an "immortal soul" or feel compelled to erect iron pillars and stone steles broadcasting sacred manifestos across their entire nations.

This specific misunderstanding frequently surfaces in comparisons between Rome and Persia. For example, people routinely perceive Sasanian Persia as a far more quintessential "Oriental Despotism" empire compared to Rome.

In reality, the root cause of this misconception lies here: although the rulers of Persia and India possessed vastly inferior ***infrastructural power*** compared to their counterparts in China and Rome, they indeed likely possessed overwhelmingly greater ***despotic power.*** This is remarkably easy to comprehend. Compared to the relatively streamlined domestic politics of China and Rome, the empires of Persia and India encompassed a staggering multitude of tribes and ***communities*** (社群). On one hand, these local autonomous entities severely obstructed state power from penetrating down to the social grassroots. But on the other hand, each of them partitioned a fraction of state power, resulting in state power being highly fragmented across various strata, tribes, and ***communities***. Consequently, the ruler possessed no necessity to pander to or negotiate with any single faction.

Concurrently, a severe deficit in ***infrastructural power*** organically incentivizes rulers to vehemently flaunt and propagate their ***despotic power*** as a desperate psychological mechanism to maintain their rule. Conversely, rulers who wield astronomical ***infrastructural power*** rarely feel the need to resort to such theatrics.

When we observe Chinese history, this dynamic is glaringly conspicuous. When Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) first unified China, the empire's bureaucratic system was not merely imperfect—it fundamentally lacked enough officials to administer the newly conquered East. Let alone the sheer volume of opposition activities in the provinces, even within the capital of Xianyang (咸阳), assassinations targeting the emperor never ceased, and the assassins could fundamentally never be caught. Anti-Qin attacks and the propaganda of ominous mystical anomalies were virtually omnipresent. Aside from venting his impotent rage through large-scale massacres, Ying Zheng (嬴政) was utterly powerless to remedy this reality.

Yet, it was precisely this Qin Shi Huang who, during his endless imperial inspection tours, incessantly erected stone steles to broadcast his martial achievements of the "Inaugural Unification and Great Peace" (初一泰平) and to frantically deify himself. This undeniably evokes immediate parallels to the stone reliefs of Persia and the iron and stone pillars of India.

In truth, they are the exact same phenomenon. These rulers commanded the hollow shell of an empire, but they were acutely and terrifyingly aware of their agonizing lack of ***infrastructural power***. Therefore, they were absolutely compelled to launch such deification propaganda. Similarly, in the official historical records, the reigns of Emperor Gaozu of Han (汉高帝刘邦) and Emperor Wen (汉文帝刘恒) were saturated with mystical phenomena and "auspicious omens" (祥瑞的异象). However, by the reign of Emperor Jing of Han (汉景帝), the reporting of such divine anomalies conspicuously plummeted.

By the era of Emperor Wu (汉武帝), Liu Che (刘彻)—ruling as the monarch of China's highly ***typical classical society*** (典型古典社会)—can unhesitatingly be proclaimed as the emperor who wielded the most colossal ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) in our nation's history, judged purely by his political, economic, and military maneuvers across half a century.

However, seemingly in stark contradiction to the absolute power he commanded, the orthodox historical records reveal that this man exceedingly rarely flaunted his might or martial achievements. Compared to his fellow classical monarchs globally, this is almost unfathomable. Despite frequently inspecting the empire in his later years, he absolutely never erected stone steles or inscriptions to boast of his greatness. Emperor Wu possessed phenomenal literary cultivation, yet aside from the highly formalized poetry required for the state sacrifices to Heaven and Earth (郊祀诗文), his literary works basically only expressed personal, intimate emotions.

Emperor Wu invented the concept of the "Era Name" (年号 / *Nianhao*). Yet, he personally utilized it essentially as a milestone or target to commemorate the state's development over a four- or six-year cycle. It was utterly unlike the era names shortly after his death, which rapidly degenerated into tools for broadcasting orthodox legitimacy and praying for mystical "auspicious omens" (祈求祥瑞).

In fact, let alone modern readers, for over four centuries from Emperor Wu's death up to the Jin Dynasty, intellectuals universally found this baffling. In the fiction and folklore concerning Emperor Wu circulating from the Han to the Jin dynasties, people would rather believe that he organized massive state ceremonies specifically to seek the elixir of immortality from deities like the Queen Mother of the West (西王母), rather than believing he did so to flaunt his own monumental merits.

This paradox precisely reflects the fundamental dichotomy between *infrastructural power* and *despotic power* (专制性权力).

Despotic power places an overwhelming emphasis on cultivating an atmosphere of mystery and psychological distance in its sensory projection. Its precise utility lies in terrifying the opposition with an overwhelming aura, ensuring they can never fathom the monarch's true depth or vulnerabilities. Once this paper-thin facade is punctured, the ruler is finished.

If we observe the accounts of the ***medieval*** Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta regarding how the monarch of the Mali Empire exercised power in his court, or how the Japanese Emperors during the mid-Heian period (平安时代中期) listened to and responded to merely a handful of high-ranking bureaucrats behind screens, this dynamic becomes incredibly obvious. Whether in the Mali Empire or mid-Heian Japan, the ***infrastructural power*** the monarch possessed was agonizingly weak.

Emperor Wu's paradigm, however, was fundamentally different. He was required to execute hyper-intensive political, economic, and military operations across a colossal territory of seven to eight million square kilometers, governing a population of thirty to forty million people for an entire half-century. Furthermore, he orchestrated exploratory expeditions into the unknown external world far beyond this zone. Unlike the Japanese Emperor's purely nominal "Ruling the Heavens" (治天 / *Chiten*), Liu Che was *actually* exercising the power of "Ruling the Heavens". **Throughout the entire pre-industrial era** (前工业时代)**, this empire's *infrastructural power* penetrated the grassroots to an unprecedented degree.**

Consequently, he had neither the necessity nor the logistical possibility to enhance his authority through the conventional theatrics of displaying ***despotic power***. For instance, this man

fundamentally had no way to maintain any aura of mystery or distance. He was required to endlessly deliberate state policies with his inner cabinet, receive and reply to memorials submitted by various social strata from every corner of the empire, appear at massive ceremonial occasions to signal the state's "reforms and institutional renewals" (更化改制), and relentlessly conduct inspection tours to receive, appease, and co-opt representatives of local interest groups *(such as the alchemists/fangshi [方士] along the Shandong coast).*

When the emperor himself needed to process state affairs with maximum efficiency—and when his *infrastructural power* was already so astronomical that it strained the limits of technological feasibility in that era—he naturally had zero necessity to squander his attention on various sanctification and deification rituals.

Furthermore, we must never forget the very definition of ***despotic power***: the mere display of this power inherently signifies a brutal contempt for the right to speak of all other political participants. It is impossible to exercise it without violently offending people. Even a monarch revered as a god or a descendant of gods is, in essence, merely a mortal man; a sword to the neck will kill him just the same.

Therefore, for any rational ruler, wantonly provoking completely unpredictable risks for absolutely no reason—especially when there is zero necessity to flaunt ***despotic power***—is an act of colossal stupidity. **And Liu Che, undeniably, was a terrifyingly brilliant and intelligent ruler.**

We shall utilize a fascinating historical case study to illustrate precisely how Emperor Wu personally avoided excessively displaying his ***despotic power*** (专制性权力). This is the incident of the Eastward Relocation of Hangu Pass (函谷关东迁事件), which occurred in the winter of the third year of the Yuanding era *(114 BC; though one must not forget that prior to the Taichu Calendar, our nation used winter as the beginning of the year).*

The Han Empire relocated Hangu Pass—the most vital gateway protecting the capital, Chang'an—eastward from modern-day Lingbao City to Xin'an City. Historical texts attribute this monumental decision to the then Chief Commandant of Nobility, Yang Pu (主爵都尉杨仆, *according to the annotations of the Eastern Han scholar Ying Shao*), who ranked among the Nine Ministers (九卿) via his identity as a "Harsh Official" (酷吏).

Yang Pu was a native of Yiyang (宜阳). *(Note: Han Dynasty Yiyang was located slightly further west than modern Yiyang, according to the Historical Atlas of China).* He submitted a memorial to Emperor Wu, lamenting that the lands of Guanzhong (关中 / "Within the Passes") had all been rewarded to meritorious ministers, transforming them into high-ranking nobility. Because his own

hometown lay *east* of Hangu Pass, he felt inferior to them. He therefore petitioned to relocate Hangu Pass eastward to Xin'an City, thereby conveniently encompassing his hometown "within the pass" (关内).

Modern readers naturally sense how preposterous this historical record is. Leaving aside the absurdity that a supreme emperor would make such a colossal strategic decision purely to satisfy a single official's vanity, the geographical locations of enfeoffed estates (食邑) fundamentally exhibited no explicit hierarchical distinction based on being inside or outside the pass.

For instance, the fief of the General of Hussars (骠骑大将军), Huo Qubing, was Guanjun County in Nanyang Commandery (which later belonged to the Jing Province Inspectorate / 荆州刺史部). The fief of the Commander-in-Chief and General-in-Chief (大司马大将军), Wei Qing, was Changping County in Runan Commandery (which later belonged to the Yan Province Inspectorate / 兖州刺史部). *(When Hangu Pass was expanded eastward, both Wei Qing and Huo Qubing's son were still alive).*

Neither of these two locations later fell under the supervisory jurisdiction of the Colonel Director of Retainers (司隶校尉); they were not the metropolitan core regions (畿辅重地) like the Three Adjuncts (三辅), the Three Rivers (三河), or Hongnong (弘农). Furthermore, the Hedong (河东) region, where Wei and Huo were born, did not technically belong to Guanzhong, despite being its natural geographical extension.

As for Yang Pu himself, he was later enfeoffed as the Marquis of Liang (梁侯) for his military exploits in pacifying the South. Liang County was genuinely located in Henan Commandery (with Luoyang as its capital), situated just a short distance southeast of Yiyang. *(Yiyang County belonged to Hongnong Commandery and was classified as "Guanzhong" following the eastward expansion of Hangu Pass).* However, it is glaringly obvious that whether in terms of noble status, personal capability, actual influence in state decision-making, or the degree of trust and emotional reliance placed upon him by the emperor, Yang Pu could fundamentally never be compared to Wei Qing or Huo Qubing. Just a few years later, Yang Pu was stripped of his titles and reduced to a commoner due to his exceedingly clumsy performance during the conquest of Joseon (朝鲜).

From this, we can decisively conclude: **Emperor Wu absolutely could not have authorized the eastward expansion of Hangu Pass merely to give Yang Pu "face," and Yang Pu himself could not possibly have believed he possessed the prestige to dare make such a brazen request of the emperor.**

In reality, we can discern the monumental geopolitical significance of Hangu Pass's eastward expansion by analyzing a subsequent measure enacted in the fifth year of the Yuanfeng era (106 BC): the delineation of Sili (Capital Region) and the Thirteen Provincial Inspectorates (十三刺史部).

The year immediately following the eastward expansion of Hangu Pass, the newly established Hongnong Commandery (located directly east of Jingzhao) instantaneously became the lock and key of the capital, Chang'an. The geographical boundaries of this commandery were rigidly constrained by four hyper-critical passes:

1. The Old Hangu Pass in the northwest.

2. The New Hangu Pass in the northeast *(where a Commandant of the Pass [关都尉] was stationed).*

3. The Wu Pass (武关) in the southeast *(also with a Commandant of the Pass).*

4. The Yao Pass (峣关 / later known as Lan Pass, which Han Yu crossed when demoted) in the southwest.

The first three passes geographically belonged to Hongnong Commandery, while Yao Pass was likely under the direct jurisdiction of Jingzhao (京兆 / Capital Governor). Concurrently, Huayin (华阴), located just a short distance west of Old Hangu Pass, served as the headquarters for the Commandant of the Capital Environs (京辅都尉). This meant that while Hongnong commanded formidable defensive power facing the East, its western flank facing the capital was still subjected to draconian defenses and strict limitations by Jingzhao.

The New Hangu Pass was located a mere 30 kilometers from Luoyang. An army could depart at dawn and arrive by dusk; conveying information via fast horses would be even more instantaneous. Geopolitically speaking, designating the New Hangu Pass as the "East Gate of Guanzhong" was actually quite absurd—it was simply too far away. **However, Hangu Pass was unequivocally the perfect "West Gate" of Luoyang.** During the late Eastern Han Dynasty, when Emperor Ling established eight passes around the capital Luoyang to defend against the Yellow Turban Rebellion (黄巾军), the New Hangu Pass ranked first among them, even though the Yellow Turban uprisings primarily erupted east of Luoyang, not west.

Through such meticulous pass construction and administrative boundary adjustments, **the Han imperial government completed an absolutely staggering geopolitical expansion within the state's internal structure.** Now, the Three Adjuncts (Zuo Fengyi [左冯翊], You Fufeng [右扶风], and Jingzhao Yin [京兆尹]), the Three Rivers (Hedong, Henei, and Henan Commanderies), and Hongnong Commandery (which bridged the two regions) were all amalgamated into Sili (司隶). Sili now extended eastward all the way to the terminus of the Yellow River's stable channel, beyond which the river was prone to devastating floods *(the catastrophic Huzi breach [瓠子决口] had only been plugged a few years prior).*

North of ***the Central Plains*** (***Zhongyuan***), according to the records in the *"Biographies of the Three Kings of Wen"* in the *Book of Han* (汉书·文三王传) and the *"Chronological Table of the Vassal Kings Since the Rise of the Han"* in the *Shiji* (史记), Emperor Wu transferred the Prince of Dai (代王) to Qinghe, and converted his former fief into Taiyuan Commandery. Following this structural adjustment, **vassal kingdoms absolutely ceased to exist west of the Taihang Mountains.**

The Taihang mountain range on the eastern flank of the Bing Province Inspectorate (并州刺史部 / encompassing most of modern Shanxi) historically served as a formidable natural barrier; the roads passing through its few passes were treacherously perilous. The primary ferry crossings over the Yellow River to the southwest were controlled by Hedong Commandery, while the terrain southeast of the Shangdang highlands was Henei Commandery. Consequently, Bing Province (west of the Taihang Mountains), along with the Shuofang (朔方) and Liang Province (凉州) Inspectorates (encompassing the Hetao region and Hexi Corridor seized from the Xiongnu), were all completely and hermetically secured under the absolute control of the imperial court.

In the South, Emperor Wu, acting as a profoundly cunning geopolitical grandmaster, repeated this exact stratagem.

Within Ba Commandery (巴郡 / with its capital in modern-day Chongqing), which belonged to the Yi Province Inspectorate (益州刺史部), the empire established the Commandant of Jiang Pass (江关都尉) stationed in Yufu (鱼复)—the extreme eastern terminus of Ba Commandery's jurisdiction, beyond which lay Jing Province. This is the exact location of the later famous Baidi City (白帝城), modern-day Fengjie. Concurrently, bordering Ba Commandery to the east was Nan Commandery (南郡 / capital Jiangling, modern Jingzhou City), belonging to the Jing Province Inspectorate. The commandant of this commandery was stationed upstream from Jiangling at Yiling (夷陵), modern-

day Yichang City. Situated precisely between Yufu and Yiling is the region commonly known today as the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River (长江三峡), which belonged to Nan Commandery.

Further south, within Zangke Commandery (牂牁郡) in the southern reaches of the Yi Province Inspectorate, the empire established Jinsang Pass (进桑关) on the upper reaches of the Red River (红河), and ordered the Southern Commandant of the commandery to station at Jinsang County. Upstream on the Zangke River, Zhupu Pass (柱蒲关) was established. Although the precise location of Zhupu Pass is unrecorded, based on the general pattern during Emperor Wu's reign where a commandant was stationed near newly established passes, this pass was highly likely located near the headquarters of the Commandant of Yelang (夜郎都尉), established during the Yuanguang era.

These two passes in southern Yi Province projected an overwhelming military deterrence from the upper reaches of the Pearl River (珠江) and the Red River down upon the entire Jiaozhi region (交趾 / a geopolitical concept encompassing modern Guangxi, most of Guangdong, and north-central Vietnam). Should any rebellion erupt locally, Han imperial forces could instantaneously sail downstream to ruthlessly suppress it.

Thus, within a mere handful of years, Emperor Wu seamlessly completed the internal geopolitical expansion referred to in the *Book of Han* as **"Expanding the Passes" (**扩关**)**.

Through this maneuver, if we look at a map, a distinctly shaped line emerges before our eyes: **this is precisely the geographical boundary demarcating the Second and Third Topographic Steps (**第二阶梯和第三阶梯**) of China.**

Emperor Wu pushed the impregnable boundaries of the central government *(capitalized at Chang'an)* eastward precisely to this line. Crucially, this encompassed the epicenter of the realm—the regions around Henei and Henan Commanderies. Through the aggressive construction of roads, canals, passes, and the meticulous adjustment of administrative divisions, the geopolitical control of the Guanzhong region was successfully projected across the entirety of China's Second Topographic Step.

Among the fourteen massive supervisory macro-regions, five—Shuofang, Bing, Liang, Yi, and Sili—were situated on the Second Step, constituting the absolute foundational stronghold (基本盘) of the imperial court. The remaining nine—You, Ji, Qing, Yan, Yu, Xu, Jing, Yang, and Jiaozhi—were situated on the Third Step, constituting the regions the imperial court aggressively guarded against.

Consequently, although the tightly controlled **"Greater Guanxi"** (the expanded Second Step region) could not boast an absolute advantage over the guarded **"Guandong"** (the Third Step region) in terms of pure population and economics *(according to the Book of Han, the expanded Guanxi region held roughly 30% of the national population)*, once the strategic topography of mountains and rivers was factored in, the balance of power between Guanxi and Guandong tilted into absolute equilibrium. Coupled with the imperial court's systemic advantages—including supreme orthodox legitimacy (大义名分), military superiority, and financial monopoly—**relying on Guanxi to suppress Guandong became an absolutely realizable reality.**

I contend that this monumental adjustment reflects, to a certain extent, the profound anxiety plaguing the decision-making echelons of the Han Empire brought about by systemic state transformations.

Although the State of Qin initially unified China using Guanzhong and Bashu as its foundational strongholds, and the early Han Dynasty partially inherited this late-Warring States geopolitical paradigm, Qin's geopolitical advantage was fundamentally predicated upon the fragmentation of the vassal states. That is to say, Qin itself was woefully insufficient to overwhelm the combined territory, population, and economy of all other states; but because China had not yet achieved administrative or identitarian integration, it was impossible for the Guandong lords to unite single-mindedly against Qin.

However, by the late stages of Emperor Wu's reign, China's internal integration was rapidly approaching completion—a process likely accelerated by the wars against the Xiongnu. While this "Great Unification" (大一统) astronomically amplified the ***infrastructural power*** the Chang'an court could wield across every corner of the nation, it inevitably birthed a terrifying new problem.

When local autonomous forces vanished almost entirely, and Chang'an metamorphosed into the capital of a heavily centralized, unified state, the existential threat it faced was no longer individual vassal states. In other words: the former capital merely needed to maintain a distinct advantage over individual geographical units separately. **Now, the empire's capital was required to perpetually sustain comprehensive suppression over the entire nation.**

The agonizing social pressure wrought by years of ceaseless warfare, combined with the implementation of state monopolies over salt and iron and the central confiscation of coinage rights, inevitably detonated explosive resentment across the Guandong regions. A ruler with the terrifyingly vast experience of Emperor Wu could not possibly have failed to recognize this. Even as he completed this internal geopolitical strategic adjustment, he personally embarked on relentless inspection tours to the East, time and time again.

Because this colossal strategic objective was highly covert and utterly inconvenient to make public, Emperor Wu did not personally propose the first step of this master plan. Instead, he manipulated a

nouveau riche official (杨仆)—whose hometown conveniently happened to be near the proposed New Hangu Pass—to submit the petition, and then executed it incrementally over eight years. **This was a stroke of Machiavellian genius.**

Although the emperor undeniably possessed the capacity to ruthlessly exercise ***despotic power***, in situations where it was not absolutely necessary, formally respecting the established legal facade of the imperial court yielded nothing but benefits. Even from the perspective of policy implementation, it encountered vastly less suspicion and obstruction.

Numerous such incidents occurred during Emperor Wu's reign. For instance, when he elevated *Taiyi* (太一) to the status of the supreme deity for state sacrifices, the historical records persistently claim this was merely him "adopting the advice of an alchemist (方士)." But if one pauses to think, the absurdity is glaring. Even if ***classical states*** (古典帝国) harbored a tendency to pivot toward monolatry (to enhance unification), is it not phenomenally preposterous that an emperor would just casually agree because some random alchemist whispered in his ear? Even in regions where religious influence was relatively weak, replacing the supreme deity of state sacrifices was absolutely never a trivial matter.

By covertly instructing individuals to submit proposals, and then executing them while feigning the posture of a humble monarch accepting wise counsel, the emperor masterfully circumvented the resentment that an excessive display of *despotic power* might provoke.

Therefore, rulers who firmly grasp absolute power frequently project an image of tolerance and respect for public discourse. **Conversely, the more a ruler visibly behaves like an arbitrary, tyrannical autocrat, the more likely his rule is nowhere near as secure as people imagine.**

Not only that, but contrary to popular imagination, Emperor Wu's control over ideology was astonishingly relaxed; in a certain sense, it bordered on laissez-faire.

For instance, although Liu An (刘安), the Prince of Huainan, was a public political dissident executed for an attempted rebellion, his magnum opus, the *Huainanzi* (《淮南子》), was permitted to survive intact *(with at least one copy housed in the Shiqu Pavilion [石渠阁] within the Weiyang Palace).* The state officially sponsored New Text Confucianism (今文经学), yet simultaneously permitted the development of Old Text Confucianism (古文经学) and appointed officials trained in it. The foundation of the state's official ideology was the Six Classics of Confucianism, yet the theories of the Yin-Yang School (阴阳家) were equally valued. Theories that outright denied the traditional "Round Heaven and Square Earth" (天圆地方) cosmology, such as the *Huntian* theory

(浑天说 / celestial sphere theory), were allowed to propagate freely. When formulating a new calendar, the sole criterion was empirical efficacy. Later on, both the "New vs. Old Text Controversy" (今古文之争) and the "Huntian vs. Gaitian Cosmology Controversy" (浑盖之争) grew increasingly fierce.

Even if one merely examines the *Gongyang* school of Confucianism (公羊儒学)—which served as the state-led ideology during Emperor Wu's reign—one must admit that for an ordinary monarch, this ideology is exceptionally difficult to tame. In the very next paragraph, we will witness how swiftly the ideological winds shifted following Emperor Wu's death.

People generally assert in broad strokes that "the process of ***feudalization*** (封建化) weakened the power of classical monarchs." However, to be precise, rather than weakening the monarch's ***despotic power*** **(**专制性权力**)**, ***feudalization*** primarily obliterated the monarch's ***infrastructural power*** **(**基础性权力**)**, simply because ***feudal relations of production*** invariably catalyzed the resurgence of the ***natural economy*** **(**自然经济**)**.

After a ***classical state surpasses its zenith***—meaning the **class transition** is fundamentally completed and **feudal production** becomes mainstream—the ***infrastructural power*** of the ***classical empire*** inevitably begins to decay. **To compensate for the hemorrhaging of *infrastructural power*, rulers will invariably attempt to artificially artificially inflate their *despotic power*.** The primary mechanisms for this involve intensifying rituals, deifying the ruler, and fiercely promoting mysticism.

Consequently, as the various ***classical empires*** across the globe marched toward their twilight, we observe an astonishingly uniform phenomenon: despite being separated by tens of thousands of miles, emperors seemingly acted in telepathic unison.

For example, from the late Roman Empire to the early Byzantine Empire, and from the late Western Han to the early Eastern Han, both Roman and Chinese emperors grew obsessively fond of executing **"doctrinal adjudications" (**经义裁决**)**. They convened grand assemblies where the emperor personally decreed what constituted true scripture versus apocrypha, and who was orthodox versus who was heretical *(regarding Christianity and Confucianism, respectively).* In the 9th century AD, the Caliphs of the Abbasid Caliphate began enforcing an inquisition policy (*Mihna*). Similarly, King Harsha (戒日王), the last indigenous monarch to unify Northern India, was extraordinarily fond of orchestrating grand religious debate assemblies *(the great monk Xuanzang [玄奘法师] personally participated in one at Kannauj [曲女城]).*

These monarchs, trapped in the disintegration phase of ***classical society***, exhausted every conceivable method to elevate their own authority. Emperor Xuan of Han (汉宣帝) elevated the status of the *Guliang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (《春秋谷梁传》) through the Shiqu Pavilion Conference; compared to the *Gongyang Commentary* (《公羊传》), the *Guliang Commentary* was far more deeply conservative and vehemently inclined toward maintaining existing hierarchical rituals (礼制).

Naturally, the deification campaign could not halt either. Beginning in the late 2nd century AD, Roman rulers increasingly emulated their Persian counterparts in their majestic titles, ultimately completing the absolute transformation from "First Citizen" (*Princeps*) to "Living God on Earth" (Diocletian / 戴克里先). Jayavarman VII (阇耶跋摩七世), the last great *Devaraja* (神王) of the Khmer Empire, abandoned Hinduism to patronize Mahayana Buddhism *(the complexities of Buddhism will be addressed in Chapter 12, Section 27; for now, readers can assume Mahayana Buddhism is more conducive to monarchical despotism)*. He constructed even more colossal architecture at Angkor and immortalized his own image in stone carvings *(the famous "Khmer Smile")*. After his death, the Khmer Empire plummeted straight into terminal decline. The exact same dynamic occurred in the Abbasid Caliphate: the more the Caliphate inevitably marched toward political disintegration, the more the Caliph emphasized his absolute religious authority, deliberately linking his titles to the name of Allah—such as the "Shadow of God on Earth" (*Zill Allah fi'l-ard*).

However, the most violent and conspicuous mutation undeniably occurred in China. This was highly likely because China's ***feudalization*** process during that specific stage was the most ferocious.

Throughout the entire Eastern Han Dynasty, the deification of Han rulers became glaringly acute *(especially concerning Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Western Han, who had been dead for two centuries).* Yin-Yang theories were weaponized to consolidate dynastic rule, culminating in the widely accepted doctrine that the Han Dynasty possessed the "Virtue of Fire" (火德). Emperor Guangwu (光武帝刘秀) aggressively utilized mystical theories like Chenwei theology (谶纬神学 / prophetic and apocryphal texts) to endorse his legitimacy. Following his death, stone beasts and stone men were aligned before his mausoleum, forming a novel architectural component of imperial tombs known in China as the "Spirit Way" (神道). Emperor Ming of Han (汉明帝刘庄) was highly adept at exploiting dreams to amplify his mystical aura; he proactively introduced Buddhism and utilized draconian corporal punishments, like whippings and canings, to publicly humiliate his courtiers.

During the reign of Emperor Zhang of Han (汉章帝刘炟), the White Tiger Hall Conference (白虎观会议) and the subsequent compilation of the *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall* (《白虎通》) by Ban Gu (班固) propelled mysticism and the deification movement to a delirious climax. The arcane arts of *Chenwei* were forcibly synthesized with Confucianism. The **"Three Fundamental Bonds and Six Major Disciplines" (**三纲六纪**)** were officially enshrined, and hierarchical ethics were rigorously systematized—serving as the absolute ideological bedrock for the ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** in the future.

Of course, mysticism was not exclusive to China. During the period when Northern India universally commenced its ***feudalization***, Buddhism under the Pala Empire (波罗王朝) underwent massive mutations. Esoteric Buddhism (Vajrayana / 密宗修行) became spectacularly popular at the Nalanda mahavihara (那烂陀寺), Odantapuri (飞行寺), and Vikramashila (超戒寺), receiving the explicit public sponsorship of the rulers. Even today, the mystical elements embedded within the Eastern Orthodox Church are conspicuously more abundant than in Catholicism, and the former highly reveres holy icons. This is fundamentally because modern Eastern Orthodoxy incubated within the Byzantine Empire—a quintessential ***late-classical empire***.

If we observe the Roman Empire, we will discover that the loss of ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) during the late period of ***classical empires*** led to a particularly fascinating consequence: the bureaucratic-military apparatus underwent unprecedented expansion. The reason lies in the fact that, for a ***primary classical state*** (原生古典国家), during ***the zenith of classical society*** (古典社会鼎盛时期) when class succession is underway, it is relatively easy for imperial rulers to intervene in public activities and coordinate social affairs. In other words, the cost of exercising ***infrastructural power*** is low. The immense scale of the empire, coupled with its technological superiority over surrounding ***barbarians*** (蛮族), meant that even an expanding empire did not require excessive military mobilization (compared to the unification wars of the ***classical empire***). However, as ***feudalization*** (封建化) became increasingly pronounced, and with the completion of class succession and the rise of the ***natural economy*** (自然经济), the ***landlord class*** began to play an increasingly dominant role on the historical stage. At this juncture, the cost of the empire exercising ***infrastructural power*** paradoxically surged.

Worse still, unlike an expanding empire undergoing continuous external conquest—where new wealth constantly flows in and the ruling elite shares the dividends of expansion—the late-stage empire, with essentially fixed borders, found itself in a phase of zero-sum distribution. It no longer faced a situation where it could recover after suffering one or two defeats. Now, every frontier became critically vital; the loss of a single legion could very likely lead to the fall of a province,

subsequently causing the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of taxpayers, the rupturing of the fiscal chain, and thereby triggering crises on other frontiers. Furthermore, the ***barbarians*** facing the empire had achieved substantial social development during their prolonged coexistence with the empire; their threat level could no longer be compared to what it was during initial contact.

Thus, we clearly witness these changes in the history of the late Roman Empire: the state apparatus grew increasingly massive, the army multiplied, taxation became ever heavier, and administrative hierarchies grew increasingly complex. In a word, imperial rulers now needed to continuously strengthen their ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) to maintain fiscal extraction and military security, intervening in local affairs far more brutally than before. Yet even so, the costs of governance continued to skyrocket. Just as people often lament: the territorial extent of first-century Rome and fourth-century Rome was fundamentally the same, yet 300 years prior, a single *Princeps* (元首) could secure the realm, whereas 300 years later, four emperors (Tetrarchs) still could not maintain control. Although rulers would wisely relocate their capitals to centers of economic activity and trade circulation—areas which, in a sense, were less impacted by ***feudalization*** and where ***classical society*** remained relatively intact—in order to curb the growth of governance costs, historical facts show they did not succeed. The ***barbarians*** ultimately overwhelmed half of the Roman Empire, exploring the ***feudal system*** (封建制度) upon its corpse, while the remnant Eastern Empire slowly marched toward extinction over the following ten centuries.

Here, we once again witness the exceptionalism of the Chinese historical trajectory: the extreme expansion of the bureaucratic system and military force in classical China did not occur during the late period of the ***classical empire***, but was forged during the early period of the ***classical empire*** in its wars against the Xiongnu. The advantages of a ***primary classical state*** over surrounding backward ***barbarians*** are generally obvious, but the Western Han Empire clearly did not enjoy this luxury. Over several decades, the entire decision-making echelon of the Western Han was deeply anxious about the existence of a northern power capable of destroying them; classical China was forced to face continuous, strategic immense pressure. The result was that during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the empire executed an extreme militaristic response. Whether it was the fiscal extraction operations spearheaded by Sang Hongyang, or the military mobilizations totaling **over a million person-times** (上百万人次) within a few years as the Han armies attacked in all directions, these actions were not only unprecedented in classical China but could be considered solitary anomalies throughout the entirety of Imperial China.

Therefore, by the time the Chinese ***landlord class*** truly matured, they had to confront a state apparatus that was far more massive and destructive than those of comparable ***classical empires*** at the same stage. In stark contrast to what occurred within the Western Roman Empire—where the ***classical state*** itself disintegrated as the ***landlord class*** matured—these two divergent starting points would slowly steer the subsequent two millennia of history for China and Europe in completely different directions.

The loss of ***infrastructural power*** is also a crucial reason for relocating the capital during the declining phase of ***classical empires***: positioning the capital at the center of economic activity and trade circulation is obviously beneficial for reducing the costs of maintaining the empire. Taking the latter half of classical China as an example, although Ban Gu, Zhang Heng, and Zuo Si primarily emphasized ritual systems, morality, and orthodoxy when discussing the advantages of Luoyang as a capital in their works, no one can ignore the fact that during a period of declining state capacity, Chang'an could hardly serve as the capital anymore. Emperor Wu of Han could construct canals and order economic departments and the military to transport millions of *shi* (石) of grain annually across the Third and Second Topographic Steps of China from the east of the passes (Guandong) to Chang'an. Yet, the Eastern Han regime abandoned the state monopoly on salt and iron (盐铁官营) just one-third of the way through its lifespan. If readers take note of these relevant historical facts, it is not difficult to understand why classical China chose Luoyang as its capital in its latter half.

However, when all is said and done, no matter what desperate methods the rulers of the ***late-classical empires*** conceived to artificially inflate their ***despotic power*** (专制性权力), it was fundamentally impossible to compensate for the catastrophic hemorrhaging of their ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力).

In truth, even the Chinese Empire—which ultimately achieved a ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚复辟)—could not avoid this iron law. This is because the severe decay of state ***infrastructural power*** is one of the most core, defining characteristics of the early ***feudalization*** phase, absolutely dictated by ***feudal relations of production***.

As mentioned previously, although the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制) was phenomenally adept at plundering civilian wealth, its actual capacity for governance was appallingly mediocre. The ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** emerged during a ***feudal period*** (封建时期) when both despotic and ***infrastructural power***s were ordinarily quite weak. However, through a highly "self-conscious," heavily predatory, and aggressively oppressive bureaucratic apparatus sustained by the ***Scholar-official stratum*** **(**士大夫阶层**)**, the state monumentally amplified its ***despotic power***—even surpassing that of the Han Dynasty during the ***classical period*** (古典时期).

Yet, this staggering, jaw-dropping degree of *despotic power* was extraordinarily deceptive. It frequently misled observers both domestic and foreign, deluding them into believing that the Chinese Empire during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) genuinely possessed some sort of "supernatural," omnipotent ***infrastructural power*** that was somehow exempt from the dictates of socio-economic conditions.

As long as one's mind does not succumb to such foolishness, it is exceedingly easy to comprehend why, at the twilight of the Ming Dynasty, the emperors had clearly not lost an ounce of their ***despotic power***, yet China instantaneously plunged into the hands of the Manchus. This was not merely because of the universal collapse of social production in the North, but crucially because **the Ming imperial government had long since possessed absolutely zero *infrastructural power.*** Otherwise, it could have at least established a period of stable rule in Southern China.

For nations undergoing a normalized ***feudalization*** process, the systemic re-enhancement of ***infrastructural power*** was the direct result of the reorganization of social relations commencing in the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期), and it skyrocketed significantly with the rise of ***capitalism***.

Herein lies an immensely critical characteristic of ***feudal society*** (封建社会): During the transition from ***early states*** to **feudal states**, although the government's ***infrastructural power*** grows during the formative phase of the ***classical empire***, it inevitably and inexorably decays during the late stages of ***classical society***. This trajectory mirrors the fluctuations in ***despotic power***. However, when transitioning from a **feudal state** to a ***capitalist state*** (资本主义国家), the government's ***infrastructural power*** experiences a relentless, continuous surge.

During this second transitional epoch, the trajectory of ***infrastructural power*** violently diverges from that of ***despotic power***. ***Despotic power*** still trends upward during the transition from a **feudal state** to an ***early modern state*** *(e.g., **Absolute Monarchy**)*, but it subsequently collapses as the ***early modern state*** evolves into a ***capitalist democratic state***.

Under the *restoration-bureaucratic system*, China possessed absolutely no pathway to undergo this organic evolutionary process. Consequently, by the time of the final autocratic dynasty, the Qing—although the Chinese emperor seemingly commanded vastly greater ***despotic power*** than any other contemporary ruler on the planet—in terms of the actual ***infrastructural power*** the government wielded, the Qing Dynasty had long been left phenomenally far behind by Western European nations.

Here, we must identically demystify a concept that has thoroughly bewildered the entire world: **"China's Centralization of Power" (中国的中央集权).**

Today, when people utter "centralization of power," virtually no one cares to ask *which* specific "power" is actually being centralized. I explicitly assert here: **China's centralization refers purely to the centralization of *Despotic Power*, not *Infrastructural Power.***

To put it simply: the system ruthlessly concentrated the absolute capacity to arbitrarily obliterate the established social order—unconstrained by any institutions or social contracts—squarely into the hands of the central government, while draconianly prohibiting any local entity from possessing

such capacity. **However, regarding the capacity to penetrate and coordinate various social spheres through comprehensive social infrastructure, the *restoration-bureaucratic state* fundamentally was not "centralized" at all.** It utterly lacked the capacity to concentrate such functions within the central government.

Therefore, we observe that concerning critical issues such as jurisprudence, education, and water conservancy, the imperial court's presence was shockingly negligible. Those who actually managed these affairs were the local gentry (*Xiangshen* / 乡绅). Only by understanding this dynamic can we comprehend the bizarre paradox of how "Autocratic Centralization" and "Imperial Power Does Not Penetrate the Village" (皇权不下乡) could be simultaneously observed in China.

In essence, what the imperial court desperately thirsted for was aggressive, suppressive capacity (侵略性的压制能力), and absolutely never service-oriented administrative capacity (服务性的管理能力).

We certainly cannot deny that under the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会), local gentry could indeed acquire social status and a modicum of power by providing public services; but these privileges were entirely devoid of any institutional guarantee. For nearly a millennium, the violent severing of ***despotic power*** from ***infrastructural power*** plunged Chinese society into an increasingly severe state of **asymmetrical rights and responsibilities** (权责不对等). This forged a deeply pathological ***social consciousness***, driving the entire nation's ***social efficiency*** (社会效率) to absolute zero, which ultimately annihilated the ***political efficiency*** of every successive regime.

Once this is explicitly understood, anyone can effortlessly comprehend why a massive "centralized" empire like China perpetually appeared so agonizingly incompetent and clumsy.

Therefore, even though both might be labeled "centralization," identifying *which* exact power is being centralized reflects two diametrically opposed social realities. For instance, we could easily argue that ***medieval*** England, following the Norman Conquest in 1066, was also a "centralized state." Yet, compared to China, the English kings predominantly centralized ***infrastructural power*** rather than ***despotic power***. One merely needs to recall the *Domesday Book* (《末日审判书》) or the Itinerant Justices (巡回法官) to intuitively realize that the Kingdom of England had already secured a world-leading advantage in ***infrastructural power*** during the ***High Middle Ages***. This was something China's ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** fundamentally could never compare to.

In our nation, the government's ***infrastructural power*** did not surge to modern levels until the **"Vanguard System" (**先锋队制度**)** was introduced—a direct consequence of the Soviet Bolshevik apparatus being established in China.

Actually, I harbor a specific hypothesis here: **Is the so-called "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" system (**无产阶级专政制度**) pioneered by the Soviets essentially a "magic weapon" (**法宝**) utilized by nations that utterly failed to undergo the normalized social reorganization of *late feudal society*, allowing them to rapidly, albeit artificially, elevate their government's *infrastructural power* in the short term?**

However, this "magic weapon" fundamentally cannot organically incubate the myriad indispensable social organizations *(such as parliaments and labor unions)* or the modern ***social consciousness*** *(such as human rights)* generated by a genuine ***feudalization*** process. Moreover, its side effects are terminally lethal: ***despotic power*** **mutates into something infinitely more terrifying and utterly unrestrained, drastically intensifying the entire nation's violent resistance against modern civilization.**

Furthermore, from another perspective, although the ***infrastructural power*** expanded, it absolutely does not mean the underlying *intent* behind the exercise of that power has altered. The predatory and ***oppressive bureaucratic system*** fundamentally has not evolved into a ***governance-oriented bureaucratic system***.

However, genuinely answering this hypothesis requires scrutinizing regimes that are pathologically closed and opaque. People have zero access to their myriad secret archives, and due to political realities, I have access to even less here in China. Therefore, the ultimate answer to this monumental question must likely rely on the endeavors of foreign scholars.

Finally, ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力), ***despotic power*** (专制性权力), along with factors such as population, economy, and technological levels, directly determine the success or failure of short-term competition between ***states*** (国家). The "short-term" mentioned here generally refers to a period not exceeding two or three generations, contrasting with the "longue durée" [长时段] that spans different stages of the evolution of social formations. (*If at a major historical node, a period of two or three generations might also witness decisive social transformations; note that the word I use here is "witness" rather than "cause".*) The "shortness" of the "short-term" is relative to the history of human civilization; for an individual, it is a very long period within a lifetime.

The most well-known and intensely fierce form of short-term competition between state***s*** is war. We can clearly observe that both types of power exert a significant influence on a state's war-making capacity. ***Despotic power*** is fundamentally the power of the ruler to break free from social constraints. A regime with strong ***despotic power*** has the ability to rapidly and arbitrarily initiate a

war, gaining an advantage in its early stages. However, as the essential manifestation of state capacity, only ***infrastructural power*** can ensure a state's sustained combat capability. And the upper limit of a state's war-making capacity is jointly determined by its ***infrastructural power***, social production structure, population, and economic scale.

England is an excellent example. From the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期) through the entire ***early modern period*** (近代), the ***despotic power*** possessed by the rulers of the Kingdom of England was completely unexceptional across the entire Eurasian continent; it was even considered relatively weak among major countries. However, for several centuries, England possessed the most powerful ***infrastructural power*** in the world at the time. This was vividly reflected in its fiscal capacity, credit capacity, and later, its industrial capacity. In war, ***infrastructural power*** manifests as the state's ability to continuously convert resources into war-making power. Whether it is the British national debt [英国国债] or the rapid conversion of civilian vessels into naval forces, these examples extremely intuitively demonstrate how England came to possess a war-making capacity completely disproportionate to its territory and population. **The true war potential of a country lies not in the extent to which it can squeeze the society, but in the extent to which it can enable the society to synergize.**

However, when we analyze the strength or weakness of a ***state***'s ***despotic power*** and ***infrastructural power***, what exactly do "strong" and "weak" refer to here? This is a question that is both simple and prone to error, because people often easily think of the boundaries of exercising power, but frequently fail to consider the **costs of exercising power** [权力行使的成本].

Let us first look at ***infrastructural power***. As the power to coordinate social affairs and intervene in public activities, I believe ***infrastructural power*** can be divided into three dimensions: **First** is breadth [广度], meaning the scope and variety of matters the state can intervene in; **Second** is depth [深度], meaning the extent to which the state can intervene in society; and **Third** is cost [成本], meaning how many resources the state must expend to achieve this intervention.

First, regarding breadth, the breadth of a ***state***'s ***infrastructural power*** is limited both by actual spatial constraints and potentially by social functional constraints. A common example of spatial limitation is that for a large ancient empire, its central government's coordination capacity over the society in its core ruling areas and its coordination capacity over frontier societies [边疆社会] are naturally entirely different. In many cases, the empire's governance of its frontiers has to rely on ***tribal groups*** (部族) and autonomous bodies [自治团体], maintaining a state of *Jimi* (loose rein / 羁縻统治). In such situations, one should not expect the empire's ***infrastructural power*** to be very strong on the frontiers. The Sasanian Empire ruled by Khosrow I (库斯老一世) could not compare

in territorial size to the Achaemenid Empire ruled by Darius I (大流士一世). However, experiencing the ***zenith of classical empires*** (古典帝国盛期), the breadth of ***infrastructural power*** that Khosrow possessed would not be weaker than that of Darius, who relied more heavily on local autonomy.

A common example of social functional limitation is the caste system [种姓制度]—that is, highly closed ***communities*** (社群) divided according to different social divisions of labor. Groups of a specific caste collectively belong to a certain profession, and their internal conventions are constrained by religious scriptures; therefore, secular rule faces immense difficulties when attempting to intervene using political power. During the process of Europe's colonial expansion across the world, many Asian, African, and Latin American regimes that were reduced to colonies or semi-colonies had to forfeit portions of their power over tariff management, railway construction and operation, and the exercise of judicial authority. Consequently, the breadth of the ***infrastructural power*** of these states was also restricted.

Therefore, when people say "the breadth of a ***state***'s ***infrastructural power*** is restricted," it does not mean that no force can intervene in the territories or domains where state power cannot reach; it simply means that the entity exercising ***infrastructural power*** there is not the nominal ruling government of the state. The Catholic Church in ***medieval*** Europe is an excellent example. In some regions, the Church owned vast tracts of land; in many domains, the Church undertook public services. It is quite obvious that the breadth of a ***state***'s ***infrastructural power*** is limited by social complexity. Regimes evolved from societies with overly simple and primitive social structures cannot possibly possess a broad scope of ***infrastructural power***, because society itself does not have that many domains to intervene in. Similarly, the territorial expanse a regime can control through various means also limits the breadth of its ***infrastructural power*** geographically.

Second, let us consider depth. If the breadth of ***infrastructural power*** is a "quantity" constrained by social scale and social complexity, then the depth of ***infrastructural power*** is a "percentage"—that is, the proportion of all affairs within the governed society in which the regime can intervene and coordinate.

Therefore, we can draw the following conclusions: some seemingly politically backward regimes, such as nomadic states [游牧国家] (*since nomadic regimes are the most typical, I use them as an example; in reality, the description applied to nomadic regimes in this section also encompasses various semi-nomadic tribes, hunting-and-gathering regimes, and agricultural chiefdoms*), possess a very limited breadth of ***infrastructural power***, yet their depth might not be low. This is because the social structure of a nomadic state itself is relatively simple, and the total number of affairs requiring coordination within the tribe is limited; therefore, it is much easier for a Khan to bring the entire tribe to a consensus and jointly complete a specific task. By multiplying the breadth and depth of ***infrastructural power***, we arrive at the potential boundary of the state capacity possessed

by a regime. If either the breadth is too small or the depth is too low, one of the multipliers will approach zero, resulting in a feeble state capacity.

However, if we fail to consider the **cost** of ***infrastructural power***, it is completely impossible to explain many phenomena in history. To take a simple example, there have been numerous nomadic regimes that defeated or even conquered historically ancient and vastly larger sedentary agricultural empires. In terms of the breadth of ***infrastructural power***, nomadic regimes could not possibly be compared to agricultural empires; and in terms of depth, many conquered agricultural empires were actually not lacking.

Here, please allow me to use our country's history as an example again. During the latter millennium of the history of the Chinese empire, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) was nothing if not complex. If one has toured the surviving county yamens [县衙] and Confucian temples [文庙] across China today, and examined the laws and bureaucratic systems of the final few dynasties, one would have to admit that, given the completeness of its bureaucratic system, a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) could theoretically coordinate social affairs quite deeply. At the very least, compared to the Western Han Dynasty (which served as a ***classical empire***), there is no reason why the breadth and depth of the ***infrastructural power*** held by the late Chinese empire should be inferior.

The problem is that a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** could never truly actualize the state capacity it theoretically possessed, because its cost of exercising ***infrastructural power*** was simply far too exorbitant. The fundamental reason ***classical empires*** could exercise ***infrastructural power*** at a relatively low cost was that ***classical society*** (古典社会) was undergoing dramatic **class substitution** (阶级更替) , and rulers could easily intervene in social affairs as arbitrators.

When the Chinese ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) matured, the ***feudalization*** (封建化) of the economy had already been completed. Theoretically, allowing the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级)—who actually controlled the means of production—to rule would naturally enable the state to exercise ***infrastructural power*** at a low cost. However, the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** maintained extreme vigilance at all times, terrified that the ***landlord class*** would seize actual political ruling power. Even as social ***productive forces*** developed during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** remained extremely wary of citizens and ***merchants*** (商人), suppressing them through various means.

Under the overarching principle that "stability overrides everything" [稳定压倒一切], the cost for a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** to exercise ***infrastructural power*** was simply astronomical. **If a**

person claims to have built an omnipotent machine, yet it cannot be driven even if one exhausts the energy of the entire universe, then no matter how capable this machine is in theory, it is utterly worthless. If a ***restoration-bureaucratic state***, facing severe external threats, attempted to fully leverage its own ***infrastructural power*** for war mobilization, the terrifying costs would first crush the state from within—the Ming Dynasty is a perfect example.

Nomadic regimes were the exact opposite: the cost for the Khans to exercise ***infrastructural power*** was incredibly low, which again is because nomadic societies themselves were relatively simple. If we consider military affairs, the cost advantage of nomadic regimes becomes even more pronounced, because warriors and producers, military equipment and production tools were highly unified in ancient nomadic regimes. Consequently, the ***infrastructural power*** that nomadic regimes could cash in during military conflicts was not necessarily much weaker than that of the bloated, impractical ***restoration-bureaucratic empires***, because the former could at least afford to pay the cost of exercising their ***infrastructural power***.

A state regime's ***infrastructural power*** is determined by these three dimensions in the following manner: the greater the breadth, the deeper the depth, and the lower the cost, the stronger the ***infrastructural power***, which manifests as formidable war potential in military conflicts. Conversely, the ***infrastructural power*** is weaker, and the war potential is feeble.

The dimension people absolutely must not forget is cost. In fact, when the text mentions that "***feudalization*** weakened the original ***infrastructural power*** of ***classical empires***," it means that the process of ***feudalization***—especially the development of the ***natural economy*** (自然经济)—massively inflated the cost for ***classical bureaucratic systems*** to exercise ***infrastructural power***. The bureaucratic system of the late Roman Empire was far more complex than during its zenith, and the social affairs it could theoretically intervene in were no fewer than before. However, the Roman monarchs of the fourth and fifth centuries had to face a management system with immense "friction" [摩擦力], hopelessly overstretched and utterly incapable of halting the ***barbarians***' (蛮族) conquest of the Western Roman Empire.

The feudal regimes that formed upon the corpse of the ***classical empire*** acknowledged the fact that the cost of exercising ***infrastructural power*** under the ***classical bureaucratic system*** had become unacceptably high, and actively sought an equilibrium state of low energy consumption. During the formation of the ***feudal political system*** (封建政治制度), the breadth and depth of the state's ***infrastructural power*** appropriately retracted (especially by "delegating" [下放] it to lower-level lords and "outsourcing" [外包] it to religious organizations), which was immensely beneficial for protecting production and the ***social surplus*** (社会剩余).

The division of ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) is different from that of ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力), because the two themselves are not symmetrical concepts. The essence of ***infrastructural power*** is state capacity, so it should be broken down into three dimensions: "quantity," "extent," and "cost."

Conversely, ***despotic power*** is fundamentally the ruler's ability to break free from social constraints, which can itself be measured by a percentage. Therefore, breaking ***despotic power*** into two dimensions is sufficient. **First** is the degree [程度]: the proportion to which rulers can act while ignoring established rules, social consensus, and interest groups (mainly ***class*** (阶级) and ***stratum*** (阶层)). **Second** is the cost [成本]: the price the ruler must pay to make **arbitrary dictatorial decisions** [乾纲独断]. Similar to ***infrastructural power***, the higher the degree and the lower the cost of ***despotic power***, the stronger the ***despotic power*** is.

It should be noted that, whether for ***infrastructural power*** or ***despotic power***, the so-called costs are not merely fiscal and administrative. However, for ***despotic power***, the crises of legitimacy and political risks included in the cost of exercising it are often far more destructive than mere economic calculations.

Let us briefly review the situation regarding the two dimensions of ***despotic power*** across the major regimes focused on in this manuscript.

First are ***classical empires*** (古典帝国). The degree of ***despotic power*** held by the rulers of ***classical empires*** was undoubtedly quite high, while the cost was relatively low. This is very easy to understand: in ***classical society*** (古典社会), there was no single dominant ruling ***class***. The two major classes undergoing turnover, along with various strata, all needed to vie for the monarch's support; therefore, they were more inclined to make concessions to the monarch's demands.

Second are the feudal states (封建国家) of ***medieval*** Western Europe. Regimes of this type had a relatively low degree of ***despotic power*** and a higher cost. The reason is also glaringly obvious: within the ***feudal system*** (封建制度), ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) at all levels organized production around the land, undertook military obligations, and conducted administrative management; the rights, interests, and autonomy of lower-level lords were protected by feudal contracts.

Next, consider nomadic regimes (游牧政权), whose ***despotic power*** was extremely high, and the cost was very low. Still based on the simplicity of the social structure of nomadic empires, there were almost no complex intermediaries between the ruler and society. In many cases, the personal decisions made by nomadic rulers relying on their prestige were the system itself.

The situation in ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** (复辟官僚国家) is far more complex. On the one hand, we can clearly observe that the rulers of ***Late Imperial China*** (中华帝国晚期) exercised a very high degree of ***despotic power***. The reasons are obvious: under the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制), the economic ruling ***class*** did not acquire political status; society lacked influential organizations capable of self-management and providing public services; and the cognition of the people and the ***intellectual stratum*** (知识分子阶层) had been tremendously polluted and degraded. These consequences were entirely deliberate acts of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, which have been discussed extensively elsewhere in the manuscript and will not be elaborated upon here. One only needs to note that the factors leading to a high degree of ***despotic power*** in ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** are the exact same reasons for the high cost of their ***infrastructural power***.

So, what about the cost of ***despotic power*** in ***restoration-bureaucratic states***? Some might instinctively answer that the cost is not high, because historically, the rulers of the Ming and Qing empires could always ignore public opinion or even kill people without paying any price. However, this clearly overlooks two major characteristics of the cost of ***despotic power*** in ***restoration-bureaucratic states***: its delayed nature [延后性] and its transferable nature [转移性].

Suppose a Khan of a nomadic khanate obstinately made a wrong decision, causing the entire ***tribal confederacy*** (部族联盟) to suffer massive losses; his prestige would take a devastating hit, and he might even be overthrown by his subordinates. That is to say, the consequences of a nomadic ruler's brutal intervention in society would rapidly rebound upon the ruler himself.

But ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** possessed two "magic weapons" [法宝]. **First**, the massive territory and population of the Chinese empire placed under an ***extractive bureaucratic system*** (榨取型官僚制度) enabled rulers to maintain their rule long-term by **robbing Peter to pay Paul** [拆东墙补西墙], right up until the load-bearing capacity of the house was completely destroyed. **Second**, the rulers possessed superb **arts of manipulating people** [驭人之术], and since they faced a populace and an ***intellectual stratum*** lacking in common sense with polluted cognition, they could always cleverly shirk responsibilities and transfer the costs.

Therefore, in the short term, the rulers of ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** seemed to always be able to exercise ***despotic power*** without paying any price. However, the societal destruction caused by such behavior does not cease to exist simply because it remains hidden for a time. **Every two to three centuries, the accumulated costs would form a catastrophic tidal wave sweeping across the entire East Asian continent, causing population and property losses unimaginable in other**

parts of the world—this is exactly what the Chinese commonly refer to as the "*Dynastic cycle*" (王朝周期律).

Therefore, we must absolutely not believe that the cost of exercising ***despotic power*** in a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** is small. **In reality, this cost is astronomically high; the price of despotic rule is transferred onto innocent commoners, and it manifests itself multiplied many times over when the society undergoes a total collapse.**

The detailed analysis of ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) and ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) ends here. Readers might wonder why I do not continue to trace down this line of inquiry.

There are two reasons. **First**, our subdivision of ***infrastructural power*** and ***despotic power***—whether previously from their physical sources (the two sets of bureaucratic systems in the Qing Dynasty) or in this section from their constituent dimensions—although capable of answering many once-perplexing questions in human history, ultimately has an explanatory power confined to the short term [短时段]; it cannot be used to explain evolution over the longue durée [长时段]. The manuscript has already provided a robust explanation for the long-term evolution of society through aspects such as the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素), social power relations [社会权力关系], and ***social efficiency*** (社会效率).

Second, ***infrastructural power*** and ***despotic power*** are merely intermediate variables in social evolution; ultimately, they are determined by specific social formations [社会形态]. This is precisely why they can only explain successes and failures within the short term, but cannot explain the process of a civilization's evolution across social stages over the long term. The factors that fundamentally determine long-term evolution are the ***primary factor of production*** and social power relations.

Therefore, when analyzing the ***infrastructural power*** and ***despotic power*** of the numerous and diverse types of regimes in human history, we will stop at merely indicating their degree of strength or weakness. We will no longer waste ink analyzing them deeply from the five dimensions, nor will we specifically point out the different systems supporting the two types of power.

Having understood the analytical methods and the common pitfalls, readers can evidently arrive at the answers they seek on their own. The singular sentence I must emphasize here is: Never forget the cost.

15, The Evolution of Infrastructural Power Since the Restoration of the Bureaucratic State and Its Political Logic

Based on the preceding discourse, readers should already possess a profoundly deep understanding of the "profound mysteries" underlying the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制). However, because the absolute severing of ***despotic power*** **(**专制性权力**)** from ***infrastructural power*** **(**基础性权力**)** constitutes one of the most essential defining characteristics of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic society***, I am dedicating this specific subsection to emphasize it.

Regarding this phenomenon, historical academia, both domestic and foreign, achieved certain realizations decades ago—for instance, the so-called "localization of elites" (精英地方化) during the Southern Song Dynasty. Yet, just like all previous research concerning China, when scholars were meticulously examining a specific body part of the elephant, they fundamentally lacked the macro-awareness that they were, in fact, studying an entire elephant.

We must explicitly point out that over the millennium spanning from the early Tang to the late Ming, a primary mutation in Chinese politics was the relentless concentration of ***despotic power*** into the central government, while simultaneously delegating ***infrastructural power*** downward to the local grassroots. This specific evolutionary process inherently marked the maturation and perfection of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***.

As I previously mentioned when discussing Japan's political reforms modeled after the Tang Dynasty, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** from the Northern Wei to the early Tang was actually quite crude and unrefined. Rulers attempted to directly command and distribute the means of production (i.e., land) and retained glaring ***feudal characteristics*** **(**封建特征**)** in their military organization. Not only did this political apparatus lack any possibility of long-term execution, but it also posed a fatal threat to the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** itself.

By the mid-to-late Tang, the Equitable Field System (均田制) had utterly vanished; the state no longer attempted to directly control the means of production. Militarily, the state underwent further "de-***feudalization***" (去封建化). This dynamic is absolutely not contradictory to "Fanzhen separatism" (藩镇割据 / warlordism), because the Fanzhen military system was intrinsically a recruited mercenary system (募兵制), where military service was structurally decoupled from land remuneration—fundamentally distinct from the Fubing (府兵 / garrison militia) of the Northern Wei and early Tang.

Transitioning from the Tang to the Song, institutionalized "office land" (职分田) essentially ceased to exist, although the Northern Song still retained welfare-oriented "granted land" (赐田). At this stage, the government's intervention in land distribution was drastically curtailed—a policy historically termed "not restraining land annexation" (不抑兼并) in China. However, this definitively did not signify a resurgence of ***feudalization***. Because the Northern Song had already hyper-consolidated the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** *(through means such as amplifying the imperial examinations)*, even if land—as the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素)—trended toward massive concentration again, the imperial court possessed inexhaustible countermeasures, and it was structurally impossible for the ***landlord class*** to mutate back into ***feudal lords*** **(**封建领主**)**.

Under these circumstances, ***infrastructural power*** was further relegated to the local level. "School lands" (学田) emerged during the Northern Song, as did the lineage-based clan system spearheaded by Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹), epitomized by "charitable estates" (义庄). Yet, even so, Northern Song politics is still categorized by scholars as "empire-oriented" (天下关怀型). Marital alliances among the **Scholar-official stratum (**士大夫阶层**)** retained a glaringly nationwide character, and their vested interests were not strictly confined to their native provinces.

By the Southern Song period, universal "office land" systems ceased to appear entirely, and ***infrastructural power*** shifted even further downward. To a massive extent, the **Scholar-official stratum** metamorphosed from nationwide political elites into socially rooted local elites. They inclined toward forging highly regionalized networks of power *(e.g., localized marital alliances)* and invested vastly more energy into the (public) affairs of their home regions.

During this phase, through the establishment of autonomous grassroots organizations like "community granaries" (社仓) and "charitable labor service" (义役), the delegation of ***infrastructural power*** under the model of "Xiangshen governing the locale" (乡绅治乡) was fundamentally realized. Grassroots justice, public works, welfare, moral indoctrination, and disaster response were almost exclusively managed by these **Xiangshen (local scholar-elites /** 乡绅**)**. One can perceive this glaringly from the shifting geographical distribution of intellectual schools: under Southern Song rule, nationwide academic schools were substantially replaced by hyper-regionalized schools of thought, and the geographical identity consciousness of intellectuals was aggressively amplified.

The late Ming Dynasty witnessed the absolute zenith of the severing of China's *despotic power* from its *infrastructural power.* The dominating power over rural society—even including the power of taxation—fell squarely into the hands of local elites such as the gentry and local magnates

(士绅、土豪). Reflected in national-level politics, this manifested as the ubiquitous rise of factions and political societies (党社), to the point where they exerted a monumental impact on the political landscape of the entire empire.

It was precisely because of this dynamic that phenomenally bizarre paradoxes emerged: **for instance, the Chongzhen Emperor (崇祯皇帝) was effectively an "absolute autocrat who was practically a bare, isolated commander" (说一不二的光杆司令).**

After "***Entering the Pass***" (入关), the Qing Empire established by the Manchus actively curbed this downward trajectory of ***infrastructural power*** in imperial China. To a massive extent, this reversal was the result of the gradually intensifying influence of the West. Because Turkey, Iran, and India also exhibited similar mutations to varying degrees during their periods of contact with the West, this constitutes a vital component of what I term ***Pseudo-modernization*** **(**伪近/现代化**)**.

The phenomenon of severing *despotic power* from *infrastructural power* has stubbornly persisted straight into the political reality of contemporary China.

For example, many domestic and foreign observers have acutely noted this reality: although the contemporary Chinese regime hyper-concentrates political power in Beijing—manifesting especially in the **absolute despotic power** over personnel appointments and dismissals—the economic power wielded by the individual provinces appears "exceptionally massive." **Naturally, this is absolutely not because our nation's rulers genuinely care about the welfare of the local populace; they are simply driving and dominating the masses utilizing the exact same mechanisms modeled by the emperors of the past.**

The aforementioned process is relatively clear. I will only address two potential doubts that might arise.

The first concerns the Chinese noun **"Zongzu" (**宗族 **/ lineage or clan)**. In China, this term is frequently utilized simultaneously to denote two fundamentally distinct concepts. The first type refers to lineages in economically developed regions that were exploited early on. The primary purpose of such lineages was explicitly to adapt to the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, particularly to its absolute core—the Imperial Examination system (科举制度). The lineage actively invested in its members by establishing charitable schools (义学) and meticulously arranging marital alliances, ensuring they perpetually maintained high-status representation within the bureaucratic apparatus.

The second type refers to lineages in newly developed, economically backward regions. In such areas, relying on the imperial examinations to secure stable social status was exceedingly difficult. Therefore, the primary function assumed by the lineage was *protection*. In contemporary parlance: **it artificially increased the "united front value" (**统战价值**) of atomized individuals.** For this type of lineage, armed brawls (械斗) triggered by land and water disputes, smuggling operations *(along with overseas emigration)*, and even occasionally resisting the government constituted their daily routines. Under specific conditions—such as regional economic development, or occasionally producing a natural-born "bureaucratic politician" who secured a high-ranking position within the system—the second type of lineage could mutate into the first type.

The second issue lies in my own terminology. When I state that ***infrastructural power*** was "delegated downward" (下放), it might erroneously lead people to assume that the imperial government was actually pleased to see the *Xiangshen* (乡绅 / local gentry) command ***infrastructural power***. This is, of course, utterly impossible. For instance, one can easily point out that the *Lijia* system (里甲制) implemented by Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋) in the early Ming Dynasty was explicitly designed—under the premise of partially utilizing pre-existing local social structures—to draconianly strengthen central control and cripple the ***infrastructural power*** held by local elites.

However, regardless of how profoundly unwilling the imperial court was, the downward shift of ***infrastructural power*** to the grassroots genuinely constituted the overarching trend over a millennium. This was simply because the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** critically lacked the political capacity to centrally exercise ***infrastructural power***. More importantly: **the absolute severing of these two powers was fundamentally beneficial to the very survival of the *restoration-bureaucratic system* itself.**

As we mentioned previously, once the bureaucratic system concentrates ***infrastructural power*** in the central government, it becomes fundamentally incapable of preventing bureaucrats at all echelons from exploiting their positions to perform "magic" and expropriate the means of production, thereby mutating into the ruling class. Because ***infrastructural power*** is inherently a *management-oriented* power, coordinating various sectors of society inevitably requires utilizing social infrastructure to dispatch people to execute tasks—a monarch cannot accomplish this alone.

For instance, during Emperor Wu's reign, the Western Han Dynasty forged a highly centralized, incredibly formidable bureaucratic system that held tight control over both despotic and ***infrastructural power***s *(albeit skewed toward predation)*. Consequently, over the lifespan of the next dozen generations, the speed of ***feudalization*** actually accelerated phenomenally. The ***landlord class*** fully exploited the bureaucratic apparatus to massively expand its own power.

The exact same dynamic unfolded when Japan reformed its institutions modeled after the Tang Dynasty. The (centrally exercised) ***infrastructural power*** possessed by the Tang political system was simply too overwhelmingly strong for an ***early state*** (早期国家). The Japanese Emperor alone could absolutely not keep the *Ritsuryō* system (律令制) running; thus, he possessed no capacity to prevent aristocrats like the Fujiwara clan (藤原氏) from mutating into massive manorial lords.

Hyper-concentrating *despotic power* in the center while aggressively dispersing *infrastructural power* to the local level not only achieved the sadistic reality where "those with power bear zero responsibility, and those with responsibility hold zero power" (有权者无责，有责者无权), but more crucially, it constituted the ultimate survival mechanism for the bureaucratic system. However, this specific arcane knowledge is not something rulers of every nation can master proficiently. At present, it appears that only a nation like China—which has perfected the dark arts of "governing humans" (治人) to an absolute pinnacle—can truly unleash its terrifying efficacy.

The Soviet Union serves as an exceptionally spectacular counter-example. The Leninist party organization simultaneously endowed the regime with phenomenally formidable and hyper-concentrated despotic *and* ***infrastructural power***. However, Russian rulers frequently blurred the lines between the party and the state administration ("党政不分"), or rather, under a hyper-centralized command economy, these two simply could not be separated.

The ultimate, inevitable evolution of this scenario was that the means of production—ostensibly labeled "state property"—fell squarely into the hands of a minority of party bureaucrats (Nomenklatura). **Once high-ranking bureaucrats mutated into the actual ruling class, what possible reason did they have to remain shackled by the constraints of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee?** Under such circumstances, it was undeniably the most rational outcome for these elites to peacefully dismantle the Soviet Union and metamorphose into autocratic dictators and oligarchs of independent nations.

China's communist leaders evidently possessed vastly richer historical experience. During the Mao Zedong era, the management system and implementation methods of China's planned economy—compared to the Soviet Union—already exhibited a certain tendency toward "decentralization" (去中心化), and the ***infrastructural power*** wielded by local authorities was significantly greater.

Even so, barely a decade after the founding of the state, Mao himself sensed this latent existential threat with phenomenally abnormal, razor-sharp political intuition. He realized that although the Leninist party and its ideology massively fortified the bureaucratic system under modern conditions, **the hyper-concentration of *infrastructural power*—or rather, the direct state control over the means of production—would intrinsically and inevitably annihilate the dictatorship of the party.**

His terror regarding this **"capitalist restoration" (**资产阶级复辟**)** *(because under modern technological conditions, the most vital means of production is capital)* directly detonated the "Cultural Revolution" (文化大革命). In a certain sense, the "Great Chaos" (大乱) successfully shattered the concentration of ***infrastructural power***, and Mao achieved his objective. However, this was ultimately not a social state capable of stable existence.

After Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) seized power, through a series of novel domestic and foreign measures, he seamlessly resurrected the darkest tradition of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic politics*** under Communist rule: **Absolute despotic power was ruthlessly clawed back to the center; *infrastructural power* was aggressively offloaded to local authorities; the government opted to control the means of production via indirect mechanisms; and ultimately, "all power belongs to the top, while all responsibility is dumped on the bottom" (**权归于上而责归于下**).**

This novel status quo in our nation received a perfectly tailored, euphemistic modifier: **"With Chinese Characteristics" (**中国特色**).**

Perhaps some might ask: Mao Zedong was a man profoundly versed in Chinese history, famously reputed to have read the *Zizhi Tongjian* (《资治通鉴》 / Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance) seventeen times. Why, then, during his rule, did he not align himself closer to China's traditional bureaucratic politics?

I contend that, aside from his extraordinarily extreme personal temperament, and the reality that the Soviet model was only just beginning its massive expansion in the late 1940s *(meaning all communist leaders essentially lacked a comprehensive understanding of the status quo)*, there is another overwhelmingly crucial reason: **The era had changed.**

The ***productive forces*** of Chinese society had, irrefutably, evolved into a historical epoch where **capital** had usurped land as the ***primary factor of production***. The latent ruling class was now the bourgeoisie, not the ***landlord class***.

As we pointed out when discussing Japanese history, the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) has historically been a relatively "weak" ruling class across all of human history. They lived dispersed, possessed a hyper-localized mindset, and acted conservatively. These characteristics were absolutely dictated by the inherent nature of land itself as the ***primary factor of production*** in the ***feudal era***. Human labor can reproduce and migrate; capital can exponentially proliferate and move instantaneously; **but land is strictly confined by fixed physical space.** It cannot run around, and developing new land is an agonizingly slow process with glaring limits.

Therefore, although the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) could successfully suppress the ***landlord class*** and prevent it from ruling for thirteen centuries, figuring out how to violently suppress the bourgeoisie was undeniably an entirely novel problem for China's bureaucratic politicians. It was perfectly normal that they required time to grope in the dark. Furthermore, China was undergoing a ferocious industrialization process, making the rapid proliferation of capital virtually inevitable. This undeniably exacerbated the existential dread of the bureaucratic rulers.

Many policies during the Mao era genuinely reflected this deliberate calculus of strictly preventing the ruling class from actually seizing rule—most classically epitomized by the draconian restrictions on population mobility between urban and rural areas, and the violent expulsion of intellectuals to the countryside (上山下乡). By the late 1970s, China's ***bureaucratic state*** had acquired an increasingly profound understanding of the capitalist world. Concurrently, rapid shifts in the international geopolitical landscape became vastly more conducive to "restoring the old system" (恢复旧制). This laid the absolute foundation for China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** to enter a novel epoch, fundamentally predicated on the suppression of the bourgeoisie.

Today, people have already witnessed that this specific reform—regardless of what it meant for the ordinary Chinese populace—was spectacularly effective for China's rulers and the ruling party. Our nation's political apparatus has maintained fundamental stability for nearly half a century, utterly surviving the apocalyptic shockwaves that annihilated the Soviet Union and the socialist states of Eastern Europe.

This undeniably appears phenomenally bizarre. After all, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping are routinely perceived, both domestically and internationally, as possessing vastly divergent political stances; the Cultural Revolution and the "Reform and Opening Up" (改革开放) are frequently viewed as diametrically opposed polarities. **Yet, the terrifying historical reality is that the ultimate objective these two generations of leaders sought to achieve was absolutely identical.** Namely: to fiercely preserve China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** under the premises of modern technological conditions and the dictatorship of a Leninist party—and ultimately, this objective was successfully realized.

People should take this as a dire warning, constantly reminding themselves of the terrifying deceptiveness and mind-bending complexity of Chinese history. Individuals who appear aligned may execute diametrically opposed actions; individuals who appear utterly incompatible may actually be operating for the exact same ultimate objective. For outsiders, distinguishing truth from illusion, reality from falsehood, is phenomenally excruciating. Especially for foreigners who do not live in China, attempting to comprehend China's history and reality without the assistance of a "native guide" is exactly like plunging into a colossal, labyrinthine underground cave system without prior reconnaissance, technical equipment, or logistical backup—avoiding disorientation and mortal peril is virtually impossible.

Our nation's history is agonizingly protracted, its documentary sources are hyper-abundant yet infested with sycophantic fabrications (佞史极多), and its social structure is uniquely convoluted. **Due to the perpetual existence of the *restoration-bureaucratic system*, the historical narrative has been artificially and systematically distorted for millennia.**

Even for those living within China's borders, it is critically imperative to constantly distinguish between two fundamental societal characteristics—***infrastructural power*** and ***despotic power***—as well as the personal psychological traits of rulers, such as tolerance or sheer sadism. While these three elements are undeniably interlinked, they possess relative independence. Societal characteristics cannot be magically altered by any single individual, and a person's individual personality might violently clash with the structural commonalities of society.

For instance, when the scholars of the Tang Dynasty evaluated the reign of Emperor Wenxuan of Northern Qi, Gao Yang (北齐文宣皇帝高洋), they encapsulated it in eight characters: *"The monarch is deranged above, yet the administration is immaculate below"* ("主昏于上，政清于下"). This can be considered a phenomenally accurate empirical observation.

Naturally, we can now flawlessly explain this phenomenon using sociological theory: The Northern Qi regime was one of the major regimes in Chinese history with the highest ***degree of feudalization***. Both the ***infrastructural power*** and ***despotic power*** possessed by the emperor and the imperial court were agonizingly weak. The Han aristocratic great clans (汉族世家) and Xianbei military aristocracies (鲜卑军事贵族) independently shouldered massive burdens of social governance at the local level. The ***despotic power*** Gao Yang could actually wield was phenomenally limited; otherwise, how could the emperor be utterly powerless to prevent his own brother from murdering his son?

When both infrastructural and *despotic power*s are abysmally weak, the ruler's personal psychological profile has an exceedingly limited impact on the entire society. Therefore, even if Gao Yang himself was a sadistic, deranged lunatic, it was structurally exceptionally difficult for him to inflict instantaneous, catastrophic consequences upon the whole of society.

However, the logic we perceive today completely contradicts the understanding of the Tang scholars back then. The Tang scholars genuinely believed this favorable situation was entirely attributable to highly trained bureaucrats and a flawlessly operating bureaucratic system. **This is the exact opposite of the truth.** If the Northern Qi's bureaucrats were genuinely highly trained, and its bureaucratic system was undeniably robust and formidable, then the inevitable consequence of *"a deranged monarch above"* would absolutely be *"an apocalyptic socio-political collapse below"* ("政糜于下").

Ancient Chinese scholars possessed virtually zero knowledge of the social sciences. Coupled with the deliberate, systematic deception perpetrated by bureaucratic ideology, even political treatises universally highly revered in Chinese history—such as the *Zhenguan Zhengyao* (《贞观政要》 / Essentials of Governance of the Zhenguan Period)—frequently contain judgments that are simply grotesque and unreadable by modern standards.

This is precisely why I assert that the greatest agony in researching our nation's history is not that "a few specific areas require correcting chaos and restoring truth" (拨乱反正); rather, the terrifying reality is asking: exactly how few areas are left that DO NOT require correcting chaos and restoring truth.

16, The Exceedingly Sluggish Formation of the Genuine Classical Iran

Next, let us shift our gaze to Iran. Previously, when discussing the history of the Islamic world, the most recent fourteen centuries of Iranian history have already been incorporated into our framework. What we must consider now is that protracted epoch—spanning over ten centuries, yet lacking in conspicuous mutations—of **classical Iran**.

Regarding the political organization of the Achaemenid Empire (阿契美尼德帝国), the military superiority upon which the empire's foundation relied was bound to vanish sooner or later, because potential adversaries would inevitably learn and adapt. The financial advantage the empire established through coinage and commercial circulation would equally be crippled by the natural bloating of the bureaucratic system. The myriad autonomous entities that initially submitted—temporarily awed by the conquerors' might—would inevitably question the necessity of continuing their subjugation to a "King of Kings." In reality, it is profoundly difficult to categorize this system itself as stable. That it managed to exist for over two centuries forces one to admit that the martial prowess of the Perso-Median coalition *(undoubtedly including some Aryan tribes further east)* was genuinely astonishing.

Although the empire's demise was entirely unsurprising, the individual who annihilated the empire became a transcendent legend. However, contrary to the colossal sensory shock Alexander the Great's (亚历山大大帝) conquests inflicted upon observers, this conquest brought exceptionally minor changes to the actual essence of Persian society—and arguably, to the essence of the entire Middle Eastern society.

From the Macedonian conquest to the Seleucid Empire (塞琉古帝国), the Greeks in Persia differed drastically from the Greeks in Egypt. They essentially did not intermarry with the local populace and confined themselves to living within cities. This was highly likely because the local ***communities*** (社群) in the Persian region remained formidably robust. While the upper-class

culture of the Persian region undeniably absorbed Greek influences, the fundamental historical trajectory of Persia itself continued to operate strictly according to its own organic rhythm.

The Arsacid Empire (安息帝国 / Parthian Empire) that supplanted the Seleucids originated in what is now northeastern Iran. The local autonomy of various regions within the Arsacid Empire was far stronger than under the Achaemenid Dynasty; this state's aristocratic assembly even possessed the authority to depose the king. Judging from the geographical distribution of the state's seven most formidable noble houses, the entire Iranian plateau at that time was essentially controlled by several massive ***tribal confederacies***. Although documentary records regarding this regime are exceedingly scarce, we can deduce that the rise of the Arsacid Empire was the consequence of further regional development in Iran; the diffusion of technology—particularly military technology—spawned a new cohort of formidable tribes across the Iranian plateau. While the Arsacid family was the most powerful, their strength fundamentally did not reach an overwhelming imbalance compared to other aristocrats, ultimately resulting in a loosely bound organizational morphology.

Considering that the so-called "Seven Great Noble Houses" of the Arsacid Empire (安息帝国七大贵族) maintained colossal influence straight through the subsequent rule of the Sasanian Empire (萨珊帝国), it is glaringly obvious that during the Arsacid epoch, Iran was still a monumental distance away from genuinely entering a ***classical society*** (古典社会).

Contemporary with the Arsacid Empire, Rome had already surged into ***the zenith of its classical era***. Coupled with the fact that Rome inherently held an overwhelming advantage in territory and population, the balance of power between Rome and Parthia tilted increasingly toward the former. However, after the establishment of the Sasanian Empire, the situation began to drastically reverse. **Just as Rome plunged into decline due to its *feudalization* (封建化) process, the Sasanian Empire was marching aggressively toward the absolute *zenith of its classical era*.**

After enduring nine centuries as an **"*early classical society*"**, Iran finally crossed the threshold into a highly ***typical classical society*** during the reigns of the King of Kings Kavad I (卡瓦德一世) and his son Khosrau I (库斯劳一世 / Khosrow I).

During their combined 80-year rule, these two generations of monarchs executed virtually every crucial imperative required of a **classical monarch**. They actively weaponized the socio-religious demands and movements of the Mazdakites (马兹达克派) as political instruments to suppress the high aristocracy and cripple the clergy. They radically reformed the taxation system, abolished the tax-exemption privileges historically monopolized by the grand aristocrats *(headed by the Seven Great Houses of Parthia)*, rigorously surveyed land across the empire, and implemented a capitation tax (人头税).

Crucially, the King of Kings vigorously patronized and cultivated a class of minor landlords known as the **Dehqan** (德赫坎 / Dehgan). The monarchs deliberately orchestrated their increasingly dominant representation within the political bureaucracy, enabling the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) to gradually secure paramountcy within the empire, thereby solidifying the **feudal mode of production** (封建生产方式) as the mainstream. The meteoric rise of the *Dehqan* also triggered profound mutations in the Sasanian military apparatus, transforming them into the absolute backbone of the army. **This specific dynamic bears a striking resemblance to the Western Han Dynasty in our nation.**

Khosrau I also constructed massive military and public engineering projects, such as the Great Wall of Gorgan (戈尔甘长城) in the northeast, the Nahrawan Canal (纳赫拉万运河) near Baghdad, and the Taq Kasra (塔克基斯拉宫) frequently featured in documentaries, renowned today for the Arch of Ctesiphon (泰西封拱门).

Khosrau I was equally a ravenous patron of philosophy and knowledge, exhibiting the intense curiosity and desire to assimilate the external world characteristic of a zenith **classical monarch**. The King of Kings granted asylum to philosophers fleeing the Byzantine Empire, displayed monumental interest in the philosophical, mathematical, and academic achievements of India, and repeatedly commissioned the translation of Greek, Sanskrit, and Syriac texts into Pahlavi (Middle Persian / 巴列维语). During Khosrau I's reign, the Academy of Gondishapur (贡迪沙普尔学院) was massively expanded to support these translation endeavors. One can also unearth glorious civilizational achievements of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) here, such as the advanced hospitals known as *Bimaristan* (Bimaristan 医院).

Undeniably, the reign of Khosrau I marked the absolute golden age of Sasanian Persia. This was forged both by his formidable personal capabilities and, more crucially, by the geopolitical timing. Not only did he capitalize on the phenomenally brief window of a ***classical society*** characterized by explicit **class transition** within Iran's 4,000-year social evolution, but simultaneously, Iran's greatest rival—the Byzantine Empire—was actively being hollowed out by the rampant proliferation of domestic **feudal manors** (封建庄园).

Dramatically, under normal circumstances, Iran's population and economy were vastly inferior—not merely compared to the Roman Empire at its zenith encompassing the Mediterranean, but even compared to the fragmented Eastern Empire alone. **However, this exact "historical time-lag" in societal stage development dictated that throughout the entire 6th century AD, Iran found itself in an increasingly advantageous position in its military confrontations against Byzantium.**

The Kings of Kings fundamentally possessed zero scientific understanding of macroscopic social development. They likely genuinely believed that Iran's surging power was a direct manifestation of their own omnipotence. Consequently, they increasingly underestimated the Byzantine Empire, initiated megalomaniacal plans with unachievable objectives, and remained utterly oblivious as to where the *true*, apocalyptic existential threat would soon emerge from.

17, The Situation in Northern India

The situation in India remains significantly more opaque. This is primarily dictated by the agonizing scarcity of historical documentary records and the inherent complexity of the geopolitical landscape across the subcontinent. Although various regions inevitably interacted, they simultaneously maintained relatively independent developmental trajectories, particularly concerning the divide between Southern and Northern India.

Despite this, it is universally acknowledged that the Gupta Dynasty (笈多王朝) represents the absolute **zenith of classical India**. This consensus is undeniably corroborated by substantial evidence, the most paramount of which is the glaring surge in social mobility.

During India's transition from the Mahajanapadas period (列国时期 / Period of the Great Realms) to a ***classical society*** (古典社会), the rigidly calcified caste system prescribed by Brahmanism had already begun to loosen. The rulers of the Nanda (难陀王朝) and Maurya Dynasties (孔雀王朝) were highly likely not born into the Kshatriya (刹帝利) caste, and may have even originated from humble origins—not to mention the foreign *(e.g., Hellenistic)* ruling families that emerged in the Northwest.

During the reign of the Gupta Dynasty, the *Puranas* (往事书) began to abandon the strict doctrinal insistence—previously enshrined in the *Manusmriti* (摩奴法典 / Laws of Manu)—that kings must inherently be born as Kshatriyas. Now, what dictated royal authority was the sheer extent of territory a ruler could actively control, utterly regardless of their origins or the methods employed to seize the throne. **The status of a Kshatriya mutated from an ascribed hereditary tier into an achieved status.**

The social status of merchants and certain artisans was concurrently elevating, a phenomenon directly reflecting the prosperity of the ***commodity economy*** (商品经济) and handicraft industries characteristic of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国).

Another demographic experiencing a glaring elevation in status was the scribes, known in India as the **Kayasthas** (卡雅斯塔). This group first emerged in a ***classical empire*** located in Northwestern

India that existed concurrently with Rome, Parthia, and the Han Dynasty—an empire referred to in Chinese records as the Kushan Empire (贵霜帝国). Serving the royal household and participating in state administration across domains such as jurisprudence, literature, and accounting, the astronomical growth in both the numbers and prestige of the *Kayasthas* glaringly reflected the expansion of the bureaucratic system.

Indian society's schizophrenic categorization of the *Kayasthas'* identity further perfectly illustrates this point. Sometimes they were revered as Kshatriyas, yet at other times, they were vilified as the product of an "illicit union" between Brahmins and Shudras (首陀罗). These profoundly fascinating contradictions perfectly mirror the fundamental characteristics of a ***classical bureaucratic system***. The *Kayasthas* who rose to prominence in classical India were highly likely exceptionally intelligent and literate individuals sourced from across various castes. However, when they appeared before the ruled masses as executors of state power and imperial will, they were inherently perceived as a ruling class comparable to Kshatriyas. Conversely, when they appeared before the entrenched Brahmin aristocracy merely as servants of the ruler, they were scorned as impure.

Simultaneously, the status of other demographics plummeted. To the northwest of the Gupta Dynasty's center of power, near Delhi, certain ancient regions of *Aryavarta* (雅利安伐尔塔 / the abode of the noble ones) situated in the Yamuna-Ganges basin suffered from catastrophic stigmatization. They were denigrated as *mleccha-desa* (蔑戾车－提舍)—an immutable, deeply stigmatizing designation applied to the lands inhabited by "low-born" ***barbarians*** and forest-dwelling tribes. As the initial foothold of the Aryans in India, the fact that this modern-day northwestern frontier experienced such a glaring degradation in status somehow inversely reflected the relentless concentration of power and wealth into a handful of massive metropolises at the empire's core. *(The aforementioned data is primarily derived from Burton Stein's "A History of India").*

Regarding the *Arthashastra* (《政事论》 / also translated into Chinese as 《利论》), although traditionally attributed to Kautilya (考底利耶), contemporary scholars increasingly lean toward the consensus that it is a text fundamentally compiled several centuries AD. This monumental work explicitly articulated demands to prohibit the enslavement of freemen, stipulated conditions for the manumission of slaves, and vehemently advocated replacing the slavery system with a tenancy system (租佃制). (The final point is manifested as the administrative system's heavy reliance on the systems of tenancy and sharecropping, as described in this work.) Similarly, in Faxian's (法显) *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (《佛国记》), there are explicit accounts of dependent peasant households bound to the land being transferred alongside the transfer of land ownership. **These historical realities undeniably reflect the aggressive development of *feudal relations of production* and feudal land tenure systems.**

What particularly shocks Chinese readers is that the myriad statecraft philosophies and governance measures articulated in the *Arthashastra* are virtually identical to the policies implemented by the Qin and Han empires. **The profound structural similarities among *classical empires* are glaringly evident.**

The explosive prosperity of academic and civilizational achievements characteristic of a classical dynasty identically manifested during this epoch. The two monumental epics, the *Mahabharata* (《摩诃婆罗多》) and the *Ramayana* (《罗摩衍那》), were definitively canonized during this period. The Nalanda mahavihara (那烂陀寺)—the absolute epicenter of Mahayana Buddhism—was established under the ferocious patronage of Kumaragupta I (鸠摩罗笈多一世), exerting a colossal impact on the entirety of Northern Buddhism (北传佛教). Monarchs aggressively patronized the arts within their courts, driving Sanskrit literary creation and Sanskrit drama (梵剧) to their absolute zenith. Mathematics, astronomy, and physics also achieved monumental breakthroughs, with the most iconic being the maturation of what is now known as the "Hindu-Arabic" numeral system (阿拉伯数字) and the invention of the cotton gin (轧棉机).

While India and Iran sequentially basked in the glory of their respective ***classical period***, China and Rome had already successively met their apocalyptic fates, collapsing amidst the process of ***feudalization*** (封建化). This catastrophic domino effect instigated the "Great Migration of Peoples" (民族大迁徙) across the entire Eurasian landmass, most notably driving the massive east-to-west movement of nomadic tribes.

Compared to the invaders plunging down from the northwest, India historically found itself at a severe disadvantage in military technology. During the **zenith of classical India**, the nomads of the northwest were insufficient to shake the foundations of the empire. However, the exact moment ***feudalization*** commenced, resisting these ***barbarians***—whom the Chinese historical records referred to as the *Huna* (匈那人 / Hephthalites / White Huns)—became increasingly excruciating, ultimately resulting in the obliteration of the Gupta Dynasty.

King Harsha (戒日王), the final indigenous monarch to establish hegemony over Northern India, originated from the Rajputs (拉杰普特人). This specific demographic was forged through the amalgamation of the indigenous populace with multiple waves of foreign invaders entering the Indian subcontinent, beginning with the Greeks. Through ceaseless border conflicts, they honed a fierce collective identity, worshipped martial prowess, and became **hyper-feudalized** *(relative, of course, to other **communities** on the subcontinent)*. They could appropriately be crowned as the **"Samurai of India"**.

During King Harsha's reign, the virulent development of the **feudal system** was already glaringly obvious. The king himself massively granted hereditary land fiefs to both ecclesiastical and secular grand aristocrats in direct exchange for their political and military allegiance. Consequently, Harsha's empire disintegrated instantaneously upon his death. Northern India plunged straight into the era of warlord chaos that universally ensues following ***feudalization***, and the power of the Rajputs aggressively expanded across the North. Only the Pala Empire (波罗王朝) in eastern Bengal managed to artificially prolong the survival of ***classical society***—simply because its socio-historical progression lagged significantly behind.

In a **feudalized** India, caste status no longer derived from bloodline inheritance; it was dictated exclusively by sheer martial violence. **This is precisely one of the absolute core characteristics of a *feudal society*.**

From a retrospective viewpoint, the ***feudalization*** of Northern India possessed monumental historical significance. The conquests of India orchestrated by the Arab Empire were violently halted at the Sindh region (信德地区). Even centuries later, when Turkic Muslims fundamentally breached the subcontinent in massive invasions, and the Indians were temporarily subjugated due to martial inferiority, **the Muslims were fundamentally incapable of propagating their own feudal system as they had seamlessly done in other regions.**

This was because the indigenous ruling class—who fiercely retained their Indian religion and culture—still comprehensively dominated social production across Northern India. This indestructible reality laid the absolute foundation for India ultimately reverting to a predominantly Hindu nation today. *(Naturally, the crucial prerequisite for this was that Hinduism at the time had already completed its mutation from an early religion, like Brahmanism, into a genuine* ***feudalized religion*** (封建宗教)*, successfully securing an unshakeable ecological niche. In regions where this process never occurred—such as Iran—Zoroastrianism was fundamentally eradicated by Islam, regardless of the fact that what survived was an "Iranianized" version of Islam).*

Right up until the end of the 17th century, the relentless rebellions spearheaded by the Rajputs against the Mughal Empire (莫卧儿帝国) remained the lethal catalyst that triggered the collapse of that empire.

However, we absolutely must not overlook the following agonizing problem: the protracted, institutionalized confrontation between the Islamic conquerors and the indigenous Indian ruling class across Northern India undeniably could not contribute any positive momentum to the ***feudalization*** process.

The former (Islamic conquerors) found it agonizingly difficult to acquire further land property rights, especially absolute ownership; they were perpetually forced to stall at the superficial level of

holding tax-collection rights and appointing tax farmers (包税人). The latter (indigenous Hindu lords) lost their political paramountcy and were fundamentally incapable of executing their ruling authority according to their own will.

This paralyzing deadlock, combined with India's terrifyingly vast "internal frontiers" (内部边疆) teeming with a colossal population, mutated into the ultimate anchor dragging down and severely retarding the ***feudalization*** process in Northern India.

18, The Situation in Southern India, and the Favorable and Unfavorable Factors for Its Feudalization

The situation in Southern India was markedly different. From the geographical trajectory of the Aryan migration into India, the rise of civilization in Southern India unquestionably lagged behind the North. Culturally, the Dravidian-speaking (达罗毗荼语) peoples of Southern India were monumentally influenced by the Aryans.

However, the social development of Southern India was phenomenally rapid. This was intrinsically because its geographical location positioned it squarely at the epicenter of the Maritime Silk Road. Although geographically segregated from Northern India by formidable mountain ranges, Southern India could seamlessly connect the vast regions from China in the east to East Africa in the west via its coastal ports. As a Chinese person, I heard the tales of the great monks Xuanzang (玄奘) and Yijing (义净) traveling to India to seek Buddhist dharma since childhood; I was always profoundly struck by the astronomical disparity in the time expended, hardships endured, and lethal perils faced between taking the overland route versus the maritime route.

Because Southern India was integrated into international trade to such a staggeringly high degree, commercial factors became a critical variable that fundamentally cannot be ignored. During the 6th century AD, commercial activities played a monumental role in regional societies. Consequently, Southern Indian rulers aggressively favored Buddhism and Jainism—religions highly conducive to commerce *(as their doctrines were fiercely embraced by merchants).*

However, what is exceptionally fascinating is that during the transition from Brahmanism to ***medieval*** Hinduism, it was precisely Southern India that played the absolutely decisive role post-first millennium AD. The **Bhakti movement** (虔诚运动 / devotional movement)—characterized by monolatry (单一主神崇拜)—originated and violently expanded within the Tamil region (泰米尔地区) of Southern India. Furthermore, Adi Shankara (商羯罗)—a philosopher occupying a monumental position in the history of Hinduism—was born in the southwestern state of Kerala. *(Regardless of how opaque his personal biography remains, the emergence of a monastic system [修道院体系] in Southern India during this era is historically indisputable).*

Although it appears bizarre that Southern India—which retained vastly more non-Aryan culture—would spearhead revolutionary changes ahead of Northern India (where Brahmanism had been entrenched for eons), upon closer scrutiny, it is not the least bit mysterious.

When an ideology has evolved and calcified in a specific region for too long, it intrinsically becomes detrimental to adapting to radical changes. It is akin to how it is fundamentally unimaginable that the Protestant Reformation, which ignited in ***late medieval Europe***, could have conceivably originated in Italy right under the Pope's nose. The ideological grip of Brahmanism in Southern India was relatively relaxed, and a vastly greater proportion of non-Aryan culture was preserved. Not to mention that maritime commerce perpetually imported diverse cultures and philosophies from overseas. **It is entirely natural that revolutionary mutations first germinate in relatively pluralistic environments.**

Concurrently, the structure of the caste system in Southern India was significantly more flexible *(or rather, simpler)*. Burton Stein notes in *A History of India* that during the transition from the classical to the ***medieval era***, people in Southern India did not strictly avoid consanguineous marriage, and even trended toward cross-cousin marriages; in some regions, there were simply only two explicit castes. This flexibility was phenomenally advantageous for the internal reformation of Hinduism.

However, although the ***feudalization*** (封建化) of Southern India might not have commenced much later than in the North *(potentially developing as early as the 7th or 8th century)*—and ideological shifts, such as the decline of Buddhism and Jainism alongside some Southern rulers even taking pride in violently persecuting Jains, certainly corroborate this—**the *feudalization* process in Southern India was equally agonizingly unsmooth.** And this was true despite the region tenaciously and successfully repelling Muslim invasions for a very long time.

The topography of Southern India was vastly more complex and volatile, and its developmental timeline was later than the North's. Consequently, its forests and mountainous terrains harbored ***communities*** **(**社群**)** that constituted a phenomenally higher percentage of the total population. Therefore, its **"internal frontiers" (**内部边疆**)** were exponentially more massive.

Furthermore, commerce played a role here somewhat analogous to its function in the Byzantine Empire. Beginning in the 9th century, massive merchant guilds (商业行会) materialized across Southern India; merchants left a ubiquitous trail of inscriptions across the entire southern subcontinent. The sheer multitude and vitality of these commercial organizations during the ***Early Middle Ages*** *(referring here to the European chronology of the **Middle Ages**)* is breathtaking, even when compared to Europe.

Yet, a hyper-prosperous foreign trade is absolutely not guaranteed to be advantageous for the formation of a feudal system. As Burton Stein astutely observed: while the decay of urban civilization undeniably occurred during India's transition from the classical to the ***medieval period***,

the magnitude of this decay was nowhere near comparable to the catastrophic urban collapse witnessed in Europe. Regarding Northern India, urban decay was likely quite pronounced during the ***Early Middle Ages***; however, in Southern India, it was highly likely imperceptible. One might even conclude that Southern India virtually skipped this phase, with its cities relentlessly developing. **This was unquestionably the consequence of a robust *commodity economy*** (商品经济) **forcefully hedging against the *natural economy*** (自然经济)**.**

For Southern Indian regimes, the strategic imperative of foreign trade was likely far more visceral than for traditional commercial states. Following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (德里苏丹国) in the North, Southern India palpably felt the crushing pressure exerted by northern Muslim regimes. Yet, in military competition, the South easily fell into a lethal disadvantage due to a chronic shortage of warhorses. Therefore, importing horses—and later, firearms—via coastal ports mutated into a desperate measure for sheer survival, no longer driven merely by profit.

Consequently, spanning from the 7th to the 14th century, Southern Indian society remained locked in a highly hybridized morphology: highly developed commercial metropolises and massive tribal populations residing in deep forests frequently coexisted within the exact same region, nominally subjugated under a single ruler.

The role played by Hindu temples (印度教寺庙) in socio-economic life was astronomically more vital than in Northern India. These temples simultaneously monopolized vast tracts of land and possessed the absolute capacity to dictate local economies—a phenomenon supposedly persisting even today.

This extraordinarily explosive proliferation of religion highly likely reflected a terrifying reality: **state power was still being violently blocked outside the frontiers by countless autonomous *communities*, petty kingdoms, and tribal chieftains.** The core zones genuinely controlled by massive states remained exceptionally limited. Religion violently rushed in to fill the colossal vacuum left by the weakness of secular power in terms of regional political, economic, and cultural integration.

This ought to be a universal iron law: **Whenever geographical environments cripple secular power's capacity to penetrate the grassroots, religion and religious organizations inevitably mutate into formidable leviathans to orchestrate and organize social life.** This dynamic is exceptionally glaring in Inner Asia. Given that Southern India sat squarely at the absolute fulcrum of Eurasian maritime trade, the gross volume of economic circulation across the region was inevitably astronomical. Coupled with Southern India's massive population, it was entirely natural for temples to aggressively participate in economic activities on a massive scale.

Therefore, it is genuinely exceedingly difficult to definitively categorize which Southern Indian regime belonged to the ***classical era*** (***classical period***/古典时代) and which was strictly a **feudal** regime; the social mutations here were agonizingly gradual.

At its absolute zenith, the Chola Dynasty (朱罗王朝) functioned far more like a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国): hereditary lords vanished from historical records, and the administrative bureaucracy vastly expanded *(though the territories under direct imperial jurisdiction remained highly likely quite limited).* The empire commanded formidable armies and extensive garrisons, launched unprecedented and unparalleled maritime expeditions into ***Southeast Asia***, and constructed myriad massive public architectural works and canals domestically.

However, by the time the Vijayanagara Empire (毗奢耶那迦罗帝国) ruled Southern India, the **feudal system** was already glaringly conspicuous. Tenancy relations dominated the mainstream, and the emperors actively incentivized local chieftains to exchange military service for lucrative land rights. During the empire's later period, the Emperor Krishnadevaraya ruthlessly swept away the autonomous chiefdoms (酋邦) within the empire's core ruling zones to enforce direct rule *(ensuring that, at the very least, there were no "internal frontiers" lingering near the capital).* Concurrently, he deliberately distributed fiefdoms to vassals (封建封臣) in newly conquered frontiers. Through these vassals, he indirectly fortified control over grassroots autonomous entities. Ultimately, the legitimacy of these grassroots rulers was tethered directly to the emperor.

Although delayed, this was a monumentally significant leap. In previous Southern Indian dynasties, various autonomous chiefdoms and petty kingdoms might have nominally paid homage to a mighty monarch, but their political legitimacy fundamentally did not derive from any superior ruler; rather, it was deeply rooted in the traditional identitarian recognition of their own ***communities*** (社群).

Consequently, we observe a second glaringly distinct characteristic in the history of Southern India: **from antiquity to the *early modern era*, this specific region fundamentally did not experience a conspicuous phase of decaying state power.** Arguably, the ***infrastructural power*** of successive regimes actually *increased* over time.

This is a point I am desperate to emphasize. Many characteristics that people today associate with the so-called ***feudal society*** (封建社会) are, in the final analysis, merely phenomena generated by the *"transition"* from a ***classical society*** (古典社会) to a ***feudal society***, rather than constituting the intrinsic essence of a ***feudal society*** itself. If a ***typical classical society*** fundamentally never existed prior to ***feudalization***, there is absolutely zero reason to assume these characteristics would manifest explicitly. This perfectly explains why Southern India could exhibit such a seemingly bizarre paradox: **"The more feudal it became, the more centralized it grew."**

Undoubtedly, the genesis of these two characteristics in Southern India stemmed directly from the hyper-complexity of Southern Indian society itself *(excessively vast "internal frontiers" and an overabundance of dispersed **communities**)*, coupled with the ferocious impact of overseas trade.

However, this exact illusion of "relentless linear progress" (一路进步) harbors colossal deceptiveness. It is precisely akin to the dazzling prosperity and advancement paraded by the Tang and Song Empires during the early phases of their **bureaucratic restoration** (官僚制度复辟). Without genuinely undergoing a complete and thoroughly exhaustive feudal process, the social organizations and ***social consciousness*** generated by that precise process simply cannot spontaneously materialize out of thin air.

It is undeniably true that when European power abruptly materialized across the globe in the 16th century, driven by the dawn of the world market and rapid technological diffusion, virtually every single non-Western regime—from the Eastern Mediterranean (Ottomans) to Iran, India, and China—experienced a massive inflation of state power. An intoxicating illusion of a booming "Golden Age" (繁荣盛世) was ubiquitous.

Yet, apart from Japan, absolutely no nation across the entire Afro-Asian expanse genuinely embarked upon the pathway to modernization. One could definitively argue that, outside of sheer population and gross economic output, these regions completely lacked the necessary "third prerequisite" (i.e., social reorganization). Regardless of what developmental plateau these nations had previously achieved, their era of relatively independent organic societal evolution was now crashing to an end. Even if their ***feudalization*** was only halfway complete, it was now fundamentally impossible to finish the second half of the journey according to a normalized historical trajectory.

The overwhelming majority of nations globally were violently forced to reckon with exactly *how* they would approach modern civilization after their organic historical progression had been savagely amputated by Western impact.

However, looking specifically at India—the protagonist of these recent paragraphs—I do not actually belittle this nation as many contemporary observers do. This is because, although India's historical progression was perpetually retarded by myriad insurmountable factors that obstructed its ***feudalization*** process, **it ultimately never birthed a phenomenally destructive, dangerous institutional apparatus like China's.**

Furthermore, unlike in China, the importation of modern civilizational achievements has generally exerted an *eliminative* effect on the archaic elements that historically choked India's development. For instance, no matter how frequently the concept of the "***community***" (社群) is resurrected in the political sloganing of modern Indians, it is fundamentally impossible for it to function as the

primary participating unit in politics as it did in antiquity. Similarly, modern technology will inevitably liquidate the state's "internal frontiers."

Conversely, a pathologically deformed bureaucratic system can undeniably weaponize modern technology to exponentially fortify its own dictatorial rule and inflict infinitely greater catastrophes. This terrifying reality was already comprehensively and irrefutably proven by the Soviet Union and its myriad satellites during the 20th century.

19, Warlord Chaos and Barbarian Invasions During the Collapse of Classical Empires

Now, let us return to the generalized historical trajectory: what profound societal mutations occur as a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) marches toward disintegration?

During the empire's terminal phase, the phenomenon of rule by **Warlords** (军阀) becomes glaringly prominent. Certain exceptionally powerful warlords might manage to restore a fleeting illusion of peace and unification following the initial chaos, but this is inevitably followed by the absolute, total collapse of the state.

The only potential paradox here is that these historical warlords have suffered phenomenally "unjust" evaluations. Contemporary observers across the globe, invariably clouded by an excessive, romanticized nostalgia for the ***Towering Mountains*** (重冈俊阜) of ***classical empires***, obsessively condemn these warlords as the annihilators of civilization, demanding they bear the ultimate responsibility for the termination of the ***classical period*** (古典时代). This is profoundly absurd**.**

It is glaringly obvious that the true culprit was the aggressive development of **feudal** land relations. The ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) systematically annexed land and expanded their manors (庄园); the ***natural economy*** **(**自然经济**)** increasingly suffocated the empire; and the imperial state systematically lost control over the provinces financially, militarily, and administratively. **This was absolutely not caused by warlords.**

On the contrary, it was those exceptional military leaders—who had long commanded forces on the empire's frontiers—who leveraged potent military machines fiercely loyal to themselves to artificially resuscitate the empire for a few extra moments. In that exceedingly brief window, frontier warlords monopolized two colossal advantages: they reaped the accumulated fruits of the ***classical empire***'s military infrastructure, while simultaneously exploiting the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process to transform their armies into private retinues (军队部曲化 / *buqu*).

During an epoch when social organization was undergoing apocalyptic disintegration, the army—relying on its intrinsic disciplinary machinery—inevitably mutated into the most highly organized social entity remaining. Many warlords hailed from humble origins and possessed zero traditional identitarian recognition that could bestow higher social status upon them. For an imperial government increasingly impotent to control its territories, these warlords and their armed forces constituted the absolute last resort to maintain the empire's vital functions, such as tax collection.

Therefore, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the warlords of ***Late Antiquity*** **(**古典时代晚期**)** and the empire were mutually parasitical. The warlords undeniably secured supreme orthodox legitimacy (大义名分) and astronomical power through this symbiosis. However, without the scaffolding provided by the warlords, the empire *(referring to the imperial system itself, not merely a specific dynasty)* would have disintegrated infinitely faster.

As for the blood-soaked civil wars between warlords, it is even more preposterous to dump the blame squarely on their heads. It was not warlord chaos that caused the collapse of social order; it was the collapse of social order that birthed warlord chaos. War was inevitable—after all, one could hardly expect competing military dictators to settle supremacy by playing rock-paper-scissors.

The contemporary narrative obsessively claiming that warlord chaos brought about the "destruction of social production" is also grotesquely exaggerated. This occurs simply because far too many people forcibly attribute the organic, inevitable consequences of the ***feudalization*** process to the warlords. If one is familiar with the generalized historical evaluations of the rulers during the Wei and Jin (魏晋) dynasties in China, this fallacy becomes glaringly obvious. The decay of the ***commodity economy*** **(**商品经济**)**, the collapse of urban centers, and even the regression of craftsmanship are inexplicably, universally blamed on the warlords. **Yet, it is glaringly evident that these are the absolute, deterministic phenomena of *feudalization*.** Individual military dictators fundamentally lacked the capacity to significantly alter this trajectory.

Although military dictators could temporarily expand their tax base and consolidate rule through mechanisms like the *Tuntian* (屯田 / military agricultural colonies) system, they could never ultimately obstruct the juggernaut of ***feudalization***. The unification of the empire was doomed to be unsustainable.

During the 3rd and 4th centuries in Rome, from the mid-9th century onward in the Arab Empire, following the collapse of the Gupta Dynasty in India, and during the late Han, Wei, and Jin periods in China—the phenomenon of military dictators actively dominating the political stage during the terminal phase of ***classical empires*** universally erupted. Even during the late Heian period in Japan, it is highly likely people found it exceedingly difficult to distinguish explicitly between the *Samurai* (武士) and warlords of that era.

The rise of warlords in ***Late Antiquity*** is an intrinsic component of the universal historical progression; one cannot absurdly claim that warlords clutching military power "murdered" the empire.

Japan's peculiar historical trajectory during this period averted the warlord (军阀) era typical of the terminal phase of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国). Warlords—monsters forged from the amalgamation of residual violent organizations and local resources upon the disintegration of a highly centralized bureaucratic apparatus (官僚机器)—lacked the foundation to emerge in Japan. This was primarily because, since the disappearance of military threats from the Asian continent, the Heian court (平安朝廷) entered a two-century-long period of low military activity. Consequently, by the late Heian period, Japan did not possess the massive, professionalized legions (职业化军团) independent of local society that ***classical empires*** typically maintained.

Secondly, the samurai (武士) who assumed military functions did not originate from collapsed bureaucratic armies; they themselves were "collaborators" deeply tethered to local land and ***relations of production*** (生产关系), not relying entirely on military force to maintain rule. Finally, during the wars of conquest and pacification against the Emishi (虾夷), the samurai gradually forged their self-identity and became accustomed to providing military service and fealty by receiving (partial) **usufruct** (用益权) of the land. This rendered the ***degree of feudalization*** (封建化程度) of Japanese samurai in the late Heian period already conspicuously higher than that of the private retainers and armies (部曲私兵) of warlords following the collapse of a general ***classical empire***. Therefore, as Japan advanced toward ***Chūsei society*** (中世社会 / ***medieval society***), a delineable warlord era fundamentally did not exist.

Following the warlord chaos, the most pivotal participant in the ***feudalization*** process materialized: **the *Barbarians* (蛮族) on the frontiers.**

The ***barbarians*** suffer from even more unprovoked infamy and historical vilification than the warlords. And in my view, they might be even more innocent. The military men on the empire's frontiers were, at least nominally, subjects of the empire. However, regarding the ***barbarians*** lurking beyond the borders: it was invariably the empire's armies that had proactively intruded into their domains decades prior—and absolutely not with peaceful or diplomatic intentions. This is a profoundly crucial reality to acknowledge.

The fundamental reason the ***barbarians*** on the empire's frontiers could phenomenally elevate their societal developmental stage in such a compressed timeframe—reaching the point where they

organically generated a demand for ***feudalization***—was, to a massive extent, **the direct consequence of the *classical empire*'s own hyper-expansion.**

This was particularly true for the Han and Roman empires—two regimes that commanded terrifyingly formidable ***infrastructural power* (**基础性权力**)** during their transitional phases. Their military presence frequently and vastly overextended far beyond the territories they could actually govern. Consequently, in the borderlands, or in military buffer zones extending beyond the borders, the indigenous populations were subjected to the overwhelming radiation of classical civilization, experiencing a meteoric elevation in their ***productive forces*** and civilizational levels.

After imperial prestige was projected across all directions (国威布于四方), a cohort of ***barbarian*** regimes swearing fealty to the empire inevitably emerged along the frontiers. To slash the astronomical costs of warfare, ***classical empires*** naturally leveraged their terrifying aura, status, and wealth to conscript these subjugated chieftains and kingdoms as auxiliary forces (仆从军).

This marked the first step in the system created by the *barbarians* entering the empire with a legal identity. And this step would be rapidly bypassed, simply because the empire was undergoing ***feudalization***. New manors were monopolizing massive demographics, and the empire's former "citizen armies" (公民军队) were evaporating.

Confronted with this fatal mutation, besides increasingly pivoting toward mercenary systems (募兵制) and military professionalization, ***classical empires*** universally and inevitably discovered a third "excellent solution": **absorbing *barbarians* directly into the imperial army.** During ***Late Antiquity***, when the monarch's power was already violently trembling on the brink of collapse, ***barbarian*** generals serving the empire stepped onto the historical stage. At the very least, these ***barbarian*** generals appeared to lack deep political roots within the empire, nor did they possess the necessary orthodox legitimacy (名分) to usurp the throne.

As the empire grows increasingly decrepit, beyond the civilized "***barbarians***" who have long interacted with and aligned themselves with the empire, menacing *"raw savages"* (生番 / a Sinicized derogatory term denoting ***barbarians*** utterly ignorant of civilization) begin to emerge from the distant horizons.

At this juncture, the empire has lost both the administrative and financial capacity to control its formerly vast frontiers. Therefore, permitting the relatively civilized ***barbarians***—those familiar to and obedient to the empire—to enter the borderlands and serve as a defensive buffer (藩屏) becomes a phenomenally natural phenomenon.

Furthermore, the virulent land annexation movement sweeping the nation driven by ***feudalization*** systematically liquidates small landholders across the empire. A crucial mechanism for massive landlords to replenish their manorial labor force is directly importing ***barbarians*** from the frontiers to serve as slaves or tenant farmers (佃客). This fiercely accelerated the mass migration of ***barbarians*** into the imperial hinterland—a phenomenon that became catastrophically conspicuous during the Western Jin Dynasty in our nation.

During the warlord chaos marking the empire's terminal phase, ***barbarians*** were frantically recruited as external reinforcements by all warring factions. Various ethnic groups relentlessly plunged deeper into the imperial heartland. This astronomically elevated the status of ***barbarian*** chieftains, allowing these previously despised, "backward" peoples to intimately and deeply participate in what was once world-renowned high politics.

When the warring factions of the empire had bled each other dry and the empire's absolute authority had utterly evaporated, the ***barbarian*** rulers suddenly realized they no longer needed to submit to anyone. They would forge an era of their own.

The unvarnished truth is: regarding the entire process of *barbarians* "*Entering the Pass*" (入关) during the late *feudalization* period, it is phenomenally difficult to legitimately blame the *barbarians*. First, the empire hyper-expanded its borders right to the ***barbarians***' doorsteps. Then, the empire's rulers proactively invited the ***barbarians*** into the borderlands. Finally, the usurpers vying for imperial power violently shoved the ***barbarians*** onto the historical center stage.

Yet, this authentic historical progression—which irrefutably occurred on both ends of the Eurasian landmass—is routinely and falsely depicted as a narrative of bloodthirsty ***barbarians*** utilizing sheer violence to ravage civilized lands, committing unspeakable atrocities of rape and pillage. It is glaringly obvious that virtually no one genuinely cares *why* ***classical empires*** meet their demise; the overwhelming majority merely desire to hunt down a scapegoat and point a condemning finger at a convenient murderer.

The ***classical empires*** of China and Rome collapsed relatively early, enabling them to complete this evolutionary trajectory largely devoid of massive external interference. However, for India and Persia—two civilizations whose ***typical classical periods*** arrived significantly later—they were inexorably forced to confront the apocalyptic shockwaves triggered by the political deaths of China and Rome (including the ***late-classical empire*** (晚期古典帝国) of Byzantium here), specifically the terrifying wave of the "Great Migration of Peoples" crashing across the Eurasian landmass.

Yet, as history explicitly demonstrates: although India and Persia identically faced ***barbarians*** amassing on their frontiers *(as a reminder: "**barbarians**" here merely denotes aliens to the imperial rulers, not necessarily "savages"; e.g., the Greeks and Hellenistic states appearing in northwestern India could hardly be deemed more backward than India)*, because the Gupta Dynasty and the

Sasanian Empire were at the absolute ***zenith of their classical empires***, these invaders—despite inflicting monumental havoc—were fundamentally incapable of subverting the empires.

On the contrary, from the 3rd to the 6th century, several formidable ethnic groups attempting to assault the Iranian and Indian empires between these two realms were utterly crushed. The most iconic examples are the Indo-Scythians (印度一斯基泰人), who were ultimately annihilated by the Gupta Dynasty at its zenith *(under the rule of Chandragupta II /* 旃陀罗笈多二世*)*, and the Hephthalites (嚈哒人), who were pulverized by the Sasanian Dynasty at its zenith *(under Khosrau I)*.

And this was achieved despite the terrifying reality that the technological advantages possessed by the Iranians and Indians over these frontier invaders were phenomenally smaller than the staggering technological supremacy once commanded by the Han Chinese and Romans. It was not until the ***feudalization*** of Northern India became glaringly pronounced, and the Gupta Dynasty began to disintegrate from within, that the *Huna* (匈那人) finally shattered this colossal empire. **But even then, they failed to fundamentally "*Enter the Pass*".** *(It is not that no one **entered the pass**; retroactively, the Rajputs were the successful invaders. But due to India's labyrinthine geopolitical landscape, other formidable forces still existed).*

These historical realities are overwhelmingly sufficient to prove that for frontier ***barbarians***, defeating a ***classical empire at its zenith*** is phenomenally close to impossible. Imperial rulers possessed the terrifying clarity to mount swift, devastating responses, and would absolutely never commit suicidal acts resembling the "inviting wolves into the house" (引狼入室) blunders seen in late empires.

The Khmer Empire (高棉帝国), acting as the absolute final ***classical empire*** *(chronologically, it might not have been the absolute last, but in terms of relatively completely experiencing the entire evolutionary cycle, it undeniably was; shortly after the Khmer Empire fell, European expansion forcibly integrated the entire globe, ensuring no region could ever again complete the evolutionary process independently)*, offers identical evidence through the stone reliefs of Angkor, despite the agonizing scarcity of written records. In the Khmer people's final glorious epoch in the early 13th century, the figures of Thai soldiers materialized in warfare bas-reliefs; they were highly likely fighting for the empire as mercenaries.

Far more tragically than the Persians and Indians, the "***barbarians***" the Khmer were forced to confront—the Burmese, the Thais, and even the Vietnamese, who relentlessly encroached from north to south under the overwhelming gravitational pull of China—were actually the technologically and organizationally *superior* side relative to the Khmer. Their population ratios were also staggeringly massive.

The Khmer Empire could barely suppress these interlopers in the 12th century. But by the late 13th century, when the Yuan Dynasty Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan (周达观) visited Angkor, the empire was already violently teetering on the brink of collapse.

However, what is genuinely astonishing is this: although one might argue that modern Cambodia is phenomenally smaller than the Khmer Empire at its zenith, the core heartland of this empire was miraculously preserved entirely. *(Even if only the core remained; the most catastrophic loss was undeniably the Mekong Delta, known as "Lower Khmer" [下高棉]).* This definitively proves that even under apocalyptic circumstances, the Khmer people still executed certain monumentally correct decisions, which will be addressed later.

Naturally, one must equally not overlook the highly specific geographical realities of the Indochinese Peninsula (中南半岛). The hyper-dense tropical rainforests inevitably constituted a brutal obstacle to conquest during the empire's expansion phase; but when the empire plunged into decline, the ***barbarians*** attempting to conquer the empire were severely obstructed by those exact same forests.

Perhaps some might argue: Did the ***Barbarians*** (蛮族) truly play a crucial role in the historical process? They did not build their states in a vacuum, but rather completed their conquests upon the corpse of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) where private land ownership was gradually strengthening and the ***manor economy*** (庄园经济) was developing. ***Feudalization*** (封建化) emerged first within the interior of the ***classical empires***, because only the ***productive forces*** (生产力) of the society within the empire's borders could earliest reach the level required to support ***feudalization***. The historical fact we observe is that in Europe outside the peak borders of Rome, the process of ***feudalization*** was indeed much later than that within the Western Empire.

However, this can by no means negate the historical achievements of the ***Barbarians***, because it was precisely the political needs of the conquerors, combined with the pre-existing socio-economic structures within the empire, that jointly propelled the process of ***feudalization*** into a brand-new stage. That is to say, the ***economic base*** (经济基础) of the **feudal system** (封建制度) was born within the empire, whereas the "political completion" of the **feudal system** required the assistance of the ***Barbarian*** conquests. Even if a late-stage ***classical empire*** already exhibited widespread ***manor economies***, local militarization, the strengthening of private land ownership, the decline of state finance, and a series of other ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征), a sprout never equates to a breakthrough. **A dead tree, even if its trunk is entirely hollowed out from within, who can determine exactly when it will fall? If a sudden gust of gale blows the tree down, we would naturally say: without the tree's decay, the wind could not have toppled it; but without this gust of wind, it might have stood rigidly for many more years.**

Although the late-stage ***classical empire*** was faltering, the **state apparatus** (国家机器) still existed; it could still collect taxes, conscript soldiers, appoint officials, and suppress localities. It was precisely the ***Barbarians*** who shook the empire's institutions from the outside, allowing pre-existing fortified manors, private armed forces, and land holdings to be legalized and institutionalized. When the ***Barbarians*** entered the heartland of the empire in massive numbers, their chieftains needed to consolidate their ruling status through rewards and grants, which further strengthened the political order based on land distribution. We must also not forget that the conquerors possessed greater room for institutional innovation. For the second category of ***Barbarians***, who were closer to unassimilated savages upon their ***Ru Guan / Entering the Pass*** (入关), they would not habitually maintain the familiar system like an imperial governor; instead, they possessed a pragmatic and completely different institutional imagination, daring to break through the old imperial system while utilizing the preliminarily feudalized ***social foundation*** within the empire.

Therefore, the **feudal system** can hardly be considered the result of the natural evolution of the ***classical empires***, nor was it created out of thin air by the ***Barbarians***; rather, it was the product of the mutual interaction between the two during a specific historical period. **But it was precisely because the *Barbarian rulers* seized the historical opportunity at the decisive moment and ultimately achieved the political breakthrough that the feudal states of Western Europe were able to act as the vanguard for the world, pioneering the path toward *early modern and modern civilization*.**

20, The Dramatic Termination and Continuation of Classical Iran

Among all classical civilizations, only Iran met its end in a phenomenally bizarre and unconventional manner. Khosrau I (库斯劳一世) passed away in 579 AD; a mere 70 years later, this colossal empire utterly vanished, consumed by the massive Islamic conquests.

Under normal historical circumstances, it is virtually impossible for a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) to be completely annihilated such an agonizingly short time after experiencing its zenith. Arguably, even during Khosrau I's reign, the Persian Empire had not yet reached its theoretical absolute peak. Because it is glaringly evident that following his death, the succeeding Kings of Kings did not necessarily possess sufficient means to forcefully patronize the newly emerging landlords while suppressing the aristocracy. Consequently, the grand aristocrats within Persia launched a ferocious counterattack.

Regardless, Iran's subjugation by the Arabs was a phenomenally staggering event. Even the victors made no attempt to conceal their sheer disbelief; Muslim historians unanimously concurred that the monumental battles that crushed Persia were nothing short of "divine miracles" (神迹). Naturally, this catastrophic outcome was forged by factors originating from both the conquerors and the conquered.

Regarding the Arab Muslims acting as conquerors: they had existed on the fringes of ***Near East*** (近东) civilization *(or more precisely, **Near East** classical civilization)* for over a millennium. The intellectuals and elites among the Arab tribes had long been exposed to and intimately familiarized with the civilizational achievements of ***the Near East***, and monotheism was already widely disseminated. Ever since Rome and Persia commenced their perpetual rivalry, the tribes of the northern Arabian Peninsula had been subjugated either by Rome or by Persia, routinely serving as auxiliary forces (仆从军队) whenever the two empires clashed. Consequently, the Arabs obviously possessed a phenomenally deep understanding of the military apparatuses of both empires.

The Prophet Muhammad (先知穆罕默德) founded Islam, promulgating myriad doctrines and dogmas that were intrinsically highly conducive to ***feudalization*** (封建化). This systematically and effectively organized the formerly fragmented Arab tribes, forging them into a hyper-cohesive military conquest machine boasting terrifying combat efficacy. It is glaringly obvious that what the Byzantines and Persians confronted was absolutely not a horde of backward, disorganized "savages" slowly migrating; it was a highly organized, tempestuous military invasion.

That the Persian rulers remained oblivious to such a colossal existential threat is perhaps forgivable *(it was indeed phenomenally difficult for them to perceive it in advance)*, but their choices regarding grand national strategy were an apocalyptic disaster.

For ***classical empires*** like Byzantium and Persia, the other was fundamentally not their true mortal nemesis. The forces genuinely capable of subverting the empires were the ***barbarians*** (蛮族) lurking on the peripheries. The historical reality is that the protracted "back-to-back" (背靠背) standoff between the Romans and the Iranians was, holistically speaking, a mutually beneficial symbiosis. Because, at worst, the empires would only suffer ***barbarian*** invasions from one specific direction.

The Romans understood this with absolute clarity. Although the national power and civilizational advancement of the Iranian regime had long been light-years ahead of the ***barbarians*** lurking in the northern forests and steppes, the Roman legions stationed facing Iran were not significantly more numerous than those defending the North. In the Caucasus region, Romans and Iranians jointly defended against nomadic tribes roaming the South Russian steppes—a strategy that was proven to be phenomenally effective.

For the Persian rulers, maintaining an inward focus on domestic affairs was infinitely more critical than executing reckless, boundless expansionist policies abroad. This was because Iran was actively navigating the critical epoch of **class transition**. The monarch should have ruthlessly capitalized on this process, maintaining draconian vigilance against the grand aristocracy.

However, Khosrau II (库斯劳二世) made the most catastrophically erroneous choice imaginable. Utterly oblivious to the limits of advance and retreat, he recklessly escalated a war—one in which he already held the moral high ground and could have easily concluded with a highly advantageous peace treaty—into an unrestrained conflict, explicitly posturing to completely annex Byzantium. This suicidal exhaustion of national resources (滥竭国力) yielded absolutely zero benefits. Instead, it left both Byzantium and Persia agonizingly enervated, plunging the internal political landscape of the Persian Empire into even deeper chaos.

Here, I must also neutrally point out that the catastrophic war against Byzantium absolutely cannot be entirely attributed to the sheer stupidity of the Persian rulers. We must acknowledge that the emergence of intense expansionist drives within a ***classical empire*** is, in a certain sense, historically inevitable. This characteristic of military expansion inherently reaches its absolute climax precisely when the process of **class transition** is at its most violent.

First, the ***classical bureaucratic system*** enables the empire to expropriate massive ***surplus of social production*** **(**社会生产剩余**)**, giving rise to unprecedentedly colossal armies. This constitutes the material prerequisite for expansion. Second, the ***classical empire*** is actively undergoing **class transition**. During this process, the monarch elevates a massive cohort of professional bureaucrats with highly complex backgrounds. Military expansion provides sufficient material incentives for these "new partners" while minimizing friction with entrenched vested interests. Third, the ***classical empire*** harbors extreme ideological arrogance, desperate to prove its universal superiority, which provides the ideological scaffolding for expansion. Fourth, the phenomenal technological advancements achieved since the "***Great Expansion***" (大扩张) of the ***classical empire***'s upper echelons render its superiority over peripheral states glaringly obvious, thereby slashing the costs of expansion.

During the late Sasanian Persian era, with the arrival of the absolute ***zenith of classical society***, Persian society was inexorably bound to undergo this precise mutation.

Yet, where could the Persians possibly expand? ***Central Asia*** at that time, though possessing trade cities, could not remotely compare to the prosperity it would achieve centuries later. Iran and India are not geographically distant, but they are separated by treacherous deserts, mountains, and the Gobi; if one factors in that the capital was located at Ctesiphon (泰西封), the logistical distance becomes even more horrific. Expanding into the regions north of the Greater Caucasus Mountains promised negligible returns, while the geopolitical costs imposed by the harsh terrain were astronomical.

In reality, Persia's primary adversary could only possibly be the Byzantines, because the eastern provinces of Byzantium were among the most phenomenally developed and wealthiest regions on the entire planet at that time. We identically observe that when Persia sought military expansion, it

did not exclusively fixate on Byzantium; it also ferociously contested the Kingdom of Aksum (埃塞俄比亚 / Ethiopia) in southern Arabia to seize dominance over Red Sea trade.

Nevertheless, we remain entirely justified in concluding that even if geographical constraints severely limited the adversaries Persia could select, the Persian Emperor still possessed the absolute capacity to comprehend the wisdom of "knowing when to stop" (知止) after securing a monumental victory, rather than dragging the state straight into the abyss of annihilation.

When the monumental Muslim armies surged northward, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (希拉克略皇帝)—recognizing his military inferiority—at least managed to devise a strategy to successfully withdraw his remaining forces back into Anatolia to mount a desperate defense. In stark contrast, the countermeasures deployed by Yazdegerd III (伊嗣埃三世) of Persia were an apocalyptic failure. Completely devoid of rational composure, he obsessively sought to reclaim lost territories and utterly failed to avoid decisive pitched battles when they absolutely should have been avoided. *(To a certain extent, this was perhaps inevitable; Heraclius, after all, had already accumulated formidable military prestige).*

Regardless, the Persian rulers must bear absolute responsibility for failing to distinguish friend from foe and for executing catastrophic strategic blunders. If Zhao Gou (赵构 / Emperor Gaozong of Southern Song), the founding emperor of China's Southern Song Dynasty, had heard the history of the Persian Empire's final 50 years *(though it is highly unlikely he ever did)*, he would have unequivocally mocked the sheer stupidity of the Persian rulers. Where in the world is there an autocratic monarch who cannot discern who his true mortal enemy is, who fails to ruthlessly control his own subordinates, and who refuses to pragmatically retreat and accept a rump state (偏安) when survival demands it.

If Zhao Gou had been ruling the Persian Empire back then, the moment he realized Ctesiphon (泰西封) was indefensible, he undoubtedly would have sprinted deep into the Iranian plateau to "rebuild the nation's rivers and mountains" (重整河山). As for the Arabs, if peace could be purchased with gold, he would have decisively paid them off. Naturally, one can fundamentally never expect the rulers of Sasanian Persia to possess the venomous, infinitely pragmatic political experience accumulated by Chinese emperors during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期).

However, as previously analyzed when discussing the history of Islam, the Arab invaders absolutely did not implement radical ***feudalization*** measures within the territories of the Persian Empire. The deep social structure of Iran underwent zero fundamental mutation. The **Dehqan** (德赫坎)—the

Iranian ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) that surged to prominence during the late Sasanian Dynasty—continued to actively develop and evolve under Arab imperial rule, comprehensively dominating social production across the Iranian region.

The Arab Empire essentially inherited Iran's *classical society* intact. This is precisely why Iranian culture was capable of staging a spectacular renaissance when the Arab Empire ultimately disintegrated. In fact, I contend that whether it was Alexander's conquest or the Islamic conquest of Persia, neither inflicted any fundamental mutation upon the true *essence* of Persian society. These conquests were fundamentally incomparable to the apocalyptic disruptions later unleashed by the Turkic and Mongol peoples.

Even under early Arab rule, religious conversion in Iran was agonizingly gradual. It was not until two or three centuries *after* the initial conquest that Islam genuinely began to penetrate the social grassroots; prior to that, the overwhelming majority of the populace remained steadfast adherents of Zoroastrianism (拜火教).

If the rise of Islam had fundamentally never occurred, I believe Iran's ***classical empire*** would likely have persisted exactly as it did in ***Our Timeline*** (本位面) right up until the massive migrations of the Turkic peoples. Concurrently, the doctrines and ***religious laws*** of Zoroastrianism would likely have undergone a natural mutation into a ***feudal religion*** *(it is possible this transition had already commenced prior to Persia's fall, though my expertise in this specific area is limited, so I dare not speak in absolutes)*, though the ruling dynasty would likely have been overthrown at least once.

Finally, an exceptionally fascinating phenomenon warrants profound attention here. If we proceed according to our current hypothesis—namely, that the ***feudalization*** process in ***the Near East*** territories ruled by Byzantium commenced significantly earlier than in the regions ruled by Iran—we might uncover a hidden geopolitical layer regarding why the Arab Empire transferred its capital from Damascus (under the Umayyads) to Baghdad (under the Abbasids). Beyond the explicit historical narratives, could it be that, as the era progressed, the former Iranian territories were structurally far more capable of sustaining a ***classical empire***, whereas the ***degree of feudalization*** in regions like Syria had already grown excessively high? **Was this precise structural advantage the underlying reason the Abbasids succeeded with Iranian support?** However, unearthing direct, irrefutable evidence to substantiate this hypothesis is likely impossible today.

For the Iranians, at least one monumental historical reality remains a source of profound comfort: by the time of the great Islamic conquests, the Iranian ***landlord class*** had already robustly established itself. Simultaneously, the Arab rulers were entirely content to strike pragmatic compromises with the ***landlord classes*** of their newly conquered territories. Consequently, a vast constellation of traditional Iranian culture was meticulously preserved straight into the ***modern era***.

During the epochs marred by frequent Turkic and Mongol invasions, although the military backbone of the regimes consisted entirely of Turkic-Mongol elites, the civil administrative bureaucrats were overwhelmingly, almost exclusively, Iranians. This can perfectly be interpreted as a massive recurrence of the structural compromise between foreign conquerors and the ***bureaucratized landlords*** **(**官僚化地主**)** *(the exact landlord stratum sustaining the bureaucratic apparatus).* Although the Iranians eventually abandoned their indigenous religion, the Islam they revere today is a highly, profoundly "Iranianized" version of Islam.

Equally, it was precisely during these six centuries—spanning from the Arab conquest to the Mongol conquest—that the Iranians ushered in their most spectacularly prosperous era of academia and science. Even the preceding ten centuries of the classical Iranian empires pale in comparison. After all, the sheer geographical expanse encompassed by the Islamic world, and the unprecedented scale of east-west human mobility, commodity exchange, and technological diffusion, were fundamentally unparalleled compared to a millennium prior.

Furthermore, compared to the Fertile Crescent in ***the Near East*** and Egypt, Iran had not suffered severe civilizational decay since the final millennium BC. Those two regions had been violently reduced to bleeding battlegrounds for competing newly rising ***classical empires*** for over a millennium *(leading up to the Islamic conquest)*, and their indigenous self-identities had long been ground into dust. Although these regions were identically conquered by the Arab Empire, and compromises undeniably occurred under Arab rule, **what indigenous traditions did they even have left to fiercely defend?**

The Persians, though enduring identical catastrophic disasters, had after all existed as a world-renowned, awe-inspiring ***classical empire*** for a staggering one thousand one hundred years. **The Iranian *landlord class* undeniably possessed formidable power and profound motivation to fiercely safeguard its cultural exceptionalism.**

After conducting a fundamental observation of the histories of India and Iran, I believe it is imperative to emphasize one crucial point here. Although we established that both Greater Iran and the Indian subcontinent harbored massive tracts of "unsettled frontiers" (未定边疆), and that this geopolitical reality severely retarded the ***feudalization*** processes in both regions, a glaring disparity simultaneously exists between Iran and India regarding this dynamic: India's geographical fragmentation and openness were visibly weaker than Iran's, rendering its cultural and ideological consciousness significantly more monolithic (一元化)**.**

The logic behind this is highly apparent. A monumental crisis facing the Indian subcontinent is the torrential precipitation season brought by the tropical monsoons. Massive, short-term deluges obliterate roads, forge impassable natural barriers, and completely sever information transmission, human mobility, and the circulation of supplies. Because political rule remains utterly reliant upon the time-sensitive efficiency (时效性) of information, personnel, and logistics, the subcontinent's

brutal environment genuinely and physically strangled the expansion and unification of political regimes.

In stark contrast, the transmission and replacement of culture and religion are fundamentally indifferent to such time-sensitive efficiency. If action is impossible during this monsoon season, simply wait for the next; if progress is blocked this year, proceed the following year. The mutation of ***social consciousness*** operates on a generational timescale (以代际为时间尺度); it can absolutely never be obstructed by mere seasonal climatic shifts operating on an annual cycle.

The situation in Greater Iran was astronomically more complex. The convoluted topography and violently shifting environments across the vast expanse stretching from the Caucasus to the Pamirs (帕米尔) did not merely impose insurmountable logistical difficulties upon political rule; they physically and effectively erected impenetrable barricades hindering the transmission and exchange of culture, religion, and language.

One can observe certain ironically fascinating historical facts: for instance, although some Iranians passionately condemn the Islamic conquest of classical Iran, they fundamentally cannot deny that the deep "Iranianization" *(linguistically speaking)* of modern Khorasan (呼罗珊) and parts of ***Central Asia*** was exclusively achieved under the rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties. Considering Greater Iran's glaringly obvious geographical openness, it is fundamentally unsurprising that its degree of cultural monolithic unity was significantly weaker than that of India.

There is an exceptionally fascinating example within the realm of political concepts. Across the classical languages of various regions globally, precisely three distinct terms emerged denoting the "known world," the "inhabited world," or "all within the four corners." They are: the Greek term **"Oikumene"** *(which later transmitted into Latin)*, the Chinese concept of **"Tianxia" (**天下 **/ All Under Heaven)**, and the Indian term **"Jambudvipa"** (瞻部洲).

These three concepts were birthed, respectively, during the lifetime of Herodotus (希罗多德), during the Western Zhou Dynasty in China *(subsequently flourishing aggressively during the Warring States period)*, and around the epoch when the Maurya Dynasty (孔雀王朝) fundamentally unified the Indian subcontinent.

We can observe with absolute clarity that the genesis of such a "Tianxia" concept genuinely originates from a universal imperative: **on the exact eve of the formation of *classical empires* during the late stage of the "*Great Expansion*" (**大扩张**), the sheer expansion of the known world and the imminence of political unification forcefully manufactured the demand to invent this concept.** None of these three terms are merely geographical nouns; they are explicitly

ideological instruments forged to construct a **"unified moral order" (**统一道德秩序**)**. The ***classical empires*** that surged in Eastern Asia (China), the Mediterranean world (Greece and Rome), and the South Asian subcontinent (India) possessed a sufficient degree of monolithic unity (一元化程度) across political, cultural, linguistic, and religious domains, thereby ensuring that the concept of "Tianxia" could be universally accepted.

Bypassing convoluted academic definitions, one can evaluate whether a concept is genuinely synonymous with "Tianxia" by applying a highly succinct, necessary but insufficient condition. The *Gongyang Commentary* (《公羊传》)—one of the most paramount texts sculpting classical Chinese ideology—repeatedly invokes the concept that **"for a true king, there is no 'outside'" (**王者无外**)**. This provides a monumental footnote for "Tianxia."

"Tianxia" is fundamentally "without an outside" (无外**). That is to say, when a term signifies "Tianxia," there exists absolutely no parallel, corresponding "complementary set" (**补集**) concept within the interactive, objective world.**

For instance, let us examine the Sumerians' concept of the "Land of the Civilized Lords" (文主地). While the Sumerians perceived the plains they inhabited as the epitome of civilization and order, they simultaneously designated the surrounding mountainous regions as *KUR*—a domain of chaos, barbarism, and hostility. Identically, the Egyptians perceived the *Kemet* (科密特 / Black Land) they inhabited as the locus of life, order, and *Ma'at* (玛阿特), while the Red Land (红土地) was the chaotic domain of Seth (赛特). They explicitly believed that beyond Upper and Lower Egypt lay the territory of the enemy, the "Nine Bows" (九弓). The Greeks believed *Hellas* (赫拉斯) consisted of people living together within the politically rational space of the polis (city-state), while the *Barbari* (巴巴里) were mere savages. Our own nation's paired concepts of *Zhuxia* (诸夏 / The Various Xia States) and *Siyi* (四夷 / The ***Barbarians*** of the Four Quarters) operated on this exact identical logic.

However, for "Tianxia," "Jambudvipa," and "Oikumene," absolutely no such corresponding complementary set exists. It is true that Indians believed that beyond (Southern) *Jambudvipa* lay the Eastern *Videha* (东胜神洲), the Northern *Kuru* (北俱芦洲), and the Western *Godaniya* (西牛贺洲)—but those were utterly inaccessible to ordinary mortals. When the Chinese initially weaponized "Tianxia" on a massive scale, they identically believed that the Lord of Mount Tai (泰

山府君) governed the underworld; yet, aside from myths and apocryphal tales, that too was fundamentally not an interactive realm.

The genesis of this "Tianxia" concept occurred **if and only if** the era coincided with the formation of a ***classical empire***. Only that specific social stage possessed the capacity to incubate and filter out such a universally utilized geopolitical concept. The conditions for it absolutely did not exist prior to this epoch, nor will they ever return after it. Therefore, throughout all of human history across the globe, there are exclusively only those three words that truly signify "Tianxia": one in the *Book of Documents* (《尚书》), one on the rock edicts of Ashoka (阿育王), and one in the *Histories* of Herodotus.

Compared to China, Rome, and India, from the Achaemenid Dynasty right through to the Sasanian Dynasty, the Persians fundamentally failed to invent a vocabulary equivalent to "Tianxia." Perhaps the closest approximation was the concept of **"Ērānshahr"** (伊朗之境), an expression denoting the territory of the Iranians. Concurrently, the Sasanians actively generated the concept of **"Anērānshahr"** (非伊朗人之境) as its counterpart, and even posited **"Jahānshahr"** (贾汗沙赫尔), a concept of a "world empire."

However, one can glaringly perceive within Sasanian ideology the exact state-building paradigm utilized by early civilizations: **structuring identity upon a binary opposition between the "Self" and the "*Barbarian* Other".** Even the proclamation of *Jahānshahr*, much like the titles claimed by the Assyrian Empire and earlier ***Near East*** monarchs as the "King of the Four Quarters of the World" (天下四方之王), retained a phenomenally high degree of similarity to them—it was purely a personalized, egotistical proclamation. It is even said that the widespread use of the term *Jahānshahr* occurred only after the Arab conquest of Iran.

One can definitively conclude that classical Iran's "worldview" fundamentally failed to distinctively differentiate itself from that of the Bronze Age. Its articulations were hyper-centric on the king *(almost exclusively deployed in royal inscriptions, rather than serving as the "public political language" of the **intellectual stratum (**知识分子阶层**)** within a **classical state)***, aggressively emphasizing the monarch's mythological claim of mastering the cosmos. This stands in glaring, diametric contrast to the highly geopolitical, cultural, and profoundly moralized "Tianxia" forged during the formation of ***classical empires***, which was deeply steeped in humanistic ideology and universality.

This glaring dichotomy heavily implies that Iran's treacherously complex geographical environment undeniably exerted a massive impact on classical Iranian society. The supreme rulers fundamentally lacked the overwhelming ideological arrogance to genuinely perceive themselves as the "defenders

of the known world's order." Instead, they pragmatically settled for being exactly what they called themselves: the "King of Kings."

21, Concerning the Islamic Feudal System and the Problem of Its Incomplete Development

The next exceptionally fascinating—and simultaneously highly controversial—problem concerns the **feudal system** *(or rather, the **quasi-feudal system*** (准封建制度)*)* of the ***medieval*** Islamic world, and the precise disparities between it and the "standardized feudal system" experienced by Western Europe.

*(Naturally, because the Islamic world was so overwhelmingly vast, monumentally complex, and its **feudalization** so incomplete, it is fundamentally impossible to pinpoint an exact chronological boundary between classical Islamic society and **medieval** Islamic society; we can only formulate nebulous judgments).*

During the rule of the Buyid Dynasty (白益王朝) in Iran, hereditary political enfeoffment *(enfeoffing royal kin)* and the **Iqta system (**伊克塔制度**)** materialized simultaneously. Considering that the ruling family of this dynasty overtly claimed royal descent from the Sasanian Dynasty, and deliberately resurrected numerous symbols and customs of pre-Islamic Iran, this empire was undeniably driven by Iranians who had merely converted to Islam.

The fact that the **Iqta system**—which later became ubiquitous across the Islamic world—first emerged under the rule of this specific dynasty proves, largely in retrospect, that the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) that had already risen in Iran was fundamentally not severely impacted by the Islamic conquest. The Islamic conquest's actual impact on Iran's socio-historical evolutionary trajectory was exceptionally limited.

However, over the ensuing five to six centuries—right up until the moment European galleons ran rampant across the Indian Ocean—the **feudal system** across the entire Islamic world failed to experience any massive developmental leaps. It completely failed to coalesce into a heavily stratified **feudal system** with rigidly defined rights and obligations akin to the European ***Middle Ages***.

"The *Iqta system* was fundamentally a system that granted land revenue rights to those bearing military obligations; it was not only theoretically non-hereditary but also a temporary arrangement with fixed terms, rather than life tenure." Let alone being theoretically hereditary, it was not even a lifelong tenure, frequently possessing strict expiration dates.

Contemporary observers are far too inclined to explain this away as a product of "cultural disparities"—especially emphasizing the supposed doctrinal and jurisprudential chasm between Islam and Christianity, two global religions. I certainly do not deny that this is a contributing factor,

but I vehemently insist upon my core thesis: **Religious and cultural differences were absolutely not the primary cause, and it had even less to do with ethnic characteristics.**

My contention is this: The primary reason the ***medieval*** Islamic world has perpetually appeared in our historical memory as a society with incomplete ***feudalization*** (封建化) is absolutely not because it possessed some hyper-unique developmental pathway. It is simply because its ***feudalization*** process commenced significantly later, and was subsequently, relentlessly, violently interrupted and obliterated by successive waves of nomadic conquerors.

At least two highly explicit pieces of evidence can definitively substantiate this view.

The first piece of evidence is this: a feudal system defined by multi-tiered subinfeudation (层层分封), where the lord-vassal relationship and landholdings are transmitted hereditarily through generations (as seen in the European ***Middle Ages***), fundamentally did not emerge overnight at the very beginning.

When the *Benefice* (采邑制) system first materialized in the Frankish Kingdom (法兰克王国) in Western Europe, it identically prohibited aristocrats and military men from passing it down hereditarily. The king granted the ***usufruct*** (土地的使用权) or mere revenue rights of the land to a minister as a reward, forging a contractual relationship—frequently translated into Chinese as "Retinue System" (扈从制 / Vassalage). The ennobled aristocrat pledged fealty to the king and provided military service, while the king bore the reciprocal obligation to protect his noble vassals.

However, the *Benefice* system during the Frankish Kingdom was emphatically *not* hereditary. The king retained the absolute right to revoke the granted land, and the vassalage relationship was fundamentally not stably transmitted across generations. It was only during the catastrophic decline and fragmentation of the Carolingian Dynasty (加洛林王朝) that granted lands were gradually usurped by their holders as hereditary estates. The possession of partial rights over the land violently expanded into absolute land ownership. Consequently, the fealty relationship between vassal and lord also began to perpetuate across generations. **By the *High Middle Ages* (11th to 13th centuries), the Western European feudal system had finally matured.**

Even in the distant East, in Japan—a nation that organically evolved a feudal structure remarkably similar to the European model—the *Samurai* (武士) class identically retained a non-hereditary reward system (恩赏制度) during their initial seizure of power. For instance, during the Kamakura period (镰仓时代), the *Shugo* (守护 / Military Governors) and the lower-ranking *Jito* (地头 / Estate Stewards) were appointed directly by the Shogunate (幕府), were absolutely non-hereditary, and

could be arbitrarily replaced or dismissed. Similarly, the *Jito* fundamentally did not possess absolute ownership of the land; they merely earned annual tribute as remuneration by providing services such as maintaining public security and collecting taxes for the grand manorial lords (庄园主).

It was not until the mid-Muromachi period (室町时代中期)—more than two entire centuries after the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate—that the Japanese Samurai class comprehensively mutated into genuine *feudal lords* (封建领主) governing hereditary fiefdoms on a national scale.

In regions like Western Europe and Japan, where myriad factors were exceptionally and perfectly conducive to ***feudalization***, it still took over two entire centuries for the rights of the lords to evolve from non-hereditary ***usufruct***s to hereditary, absolute land ownership.

Here, I must clarify a problem encountered in the preceding paragraph. Because, no matter how advanced Western Europe is today, Europeans over a millennium ago could not possibly possess the legal consciousness of modern individuals. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult for us to flawlessly map the rights recognized by people of that era onto modern concepts like "land ownership" (土地所有权) and "land property rights" (土地产权) without any deviation.

When I stated that the early *Benefice* (采邑) still did not equate to the granting of land ownership, it actually meant that the possessor of the benefice was fundamentally unable to dispose of it as private property—for instance, freely alienating it or engaging in **subinfeudation (次一级的分封)**. This was historically inevitable at the time. Because the hereditary possession of benefices was not yet universal, if a vassal's own land was, at best, held for a single generation before being revoked, how could he possibly establish secondary loyalty relationships centered around himself?

By the 12th century, once the hereditary nature of feudal land grants was universally recognized across Western Europe, the sale, alienation, and subinfeudation of benefices faced scarcely any restrictions—though naturally, in some cases, approval from the superior lord was still required.

Simultaneously, one must absolutely never forget that not all lands belonging to ***feudal lords*** in ***medieval*** Europe were acquired as remuneration for military service under a feudal relationship. In France and Germany, some formidable grand aristocrats loyal to the French King or German Emperor *(e.g., immensely powerful Dukes)* acquired their ruling status in the exact same manner as their suzerains—namely, by evolving directly from tribal chieftains into ***feudal lords***.

Under such circumstances, their hereditary rule over their own territories was self-evident. Their fealty to the King or Caesar was fundamentally driven by pragmatic calculations of family interests;

after all, the French King and German Emperor were undeniably the preeminent figures among the ***feudal lords***. These grand aristocrats intrinsically possessed vast hereditary territories *prior* to establishing feudal vassalage relationships with superior rulers, rather than being transformed into the ruling class solely because they were granted land to serve a superior lord.

Only England, following the Norman Conquest (诺曼征服), was the absolute exception. Through twenty years of relentless warfare, William I (威廉一世) systematically stripped and redistributed virtually all the land in England, ensuring that England no longer possessed the type of ***feudal lords*** that had evolved from tribal leaders on the European continent. Consequently, the phenomenon of "multiple vassalage" (多重臣属)—where a single individual simultaneously swears fealty to multiple lords—was drastically eradicated in England. Feudal relationships became crystal clear and highly stable. This not only rendered the English royal power exceptionally formidable at the time, but crucially granted the English a monumental head start throughout the entire historical trajectory.

In the ***medieval*** Islamic world, however, the favorable conditions for ***feudalization*** were inherently far fewer, and one can visibly observe the emergence of numerous highly unfavorable conditions.

For instance, because the Islamic world was situated exactly at the geopolitical epicenter of the Eurasian landmass, its commercial activities were phenomenally hyper-developed, its economy was vastly more diversified, and its urban culture remained perpetually prosperous. While superficially these undeniably cannot be deemed negative, this high degree of circulation and flexible social hierarchy was extraordinarily detrimental to the formation of the **manor system (庄园制度)**—which constitutes the ***economic base***—under the developmental conditions of a ***natural economy*** **(自然经济)**.

This was already highly prohibitive to the universal emergence of hereditary fiefdoms; after all, the indispensable economic bedrock that allows ***feudal lords*** to secure a political foothold is the **manor** possessed across generations.

Furthermore, the external incursions faced by the Islamic world were simply far too ferocious and agonizingly frequent. In ***the Middle East***, it is fundamentally impossible to find a 200-year window of uninterrupted holistic peace that would allow the **feudal system** to organically develop further. With relentless waves of Turkic and Mongol invaders aggressively crashing into this region, expecting the **Iqta system (伊克塔制度)** to organically evolve into the mature feudal system of the European ***High Middle Ages*** is simply unrealistic.

The second piece of explicit evidence is that the Iqta system was fundamentally not immutable across all regions of the Islamic world. It did not perpetually manifest strictly as a system where the

Muqti (穆克提 / the holder of the Iqta) merely collected land revenue *(possessing only Revenue Rights)*, managed general administration, completely abstained from interfering in the production and lives of the "subjects" (领民), provided zero public goods to their "fiefdom," and remained non-hereditary.

In Islamic India, during the rule of the Delhi Sultanate (德里苏丹国), the traditional **Iqta system** mutated into a feudal land grant known as the **Jagir** (贾吉尔). It is widely documented that the *Jagir* underwent further evolution, ultimately morphing into the **Zamindar system** (柴明达尔制度) during the era of the British conquest of India. The individual granted the land by the monarch was known as the **Jagirdar** (贾吉尔达).

Theoretically speaking, the *Jagir* was undeniably also a lifelong property tenure. The *Jagirdar* who was granted the *Jagir* was required to organize armies and undertake military service for the state. The remuneration he acquired was the power to administer and extract taxes from the manors *(retaining a portion for himself)*. However, it was identically non-hereditary; upon the death of the grantee, the land was required to be returned to the state.

Yet, during the reign of Firuz (菲鲁兹), the third Sultan of the Tughlaq Dynasty (图格雷克王朝) of the Delhi Sultanate, this Sultan began to universally permit the Jagir to become a hereditary right. A military aristocrat could now officially dispatch his son, son-in-law, or even a slave to succeed his *Jagir*. Firuz implemented myriad other measures highly favorable to the *Jagirdar* aristocracy, including increasing their revenue share and mitigating punishments.

Consequently, in actual political practice, the **Iqta system** under the rule of Islamic India systematically mutated into a hereditary power. Certain phenomenally powerful *Jagirdars* later transformed during the Mughal Empire (莫卧儿帝国) era into semi-autonomous Muslim rulers of princely states, translated into Chinese as **Nawab** (纳瓦卜).

I maintain that this is a phenomenally fascinating dynamic. If we meticulously observe the chronological timetable of the ***feudalization*** process in ***the Middle East*** *(particularly Iran)* versus the timetable in India *(particularly Northern India)*, it becomes glaringly obvious that the latter commenced significantly earlier than the former.

When the Gupta Empire was collapsing into ruin, the Sasanian Dynasty was aggressively marching toward its zenith. While the Rajputs (拉杰普特人) were waging ceaseless wars across Northern India, the Arab Empire was still artificially prolonging the ***classical society*** (古典社会) of ***the***

Middle East. Throughout the entirety of the ***Middle Ages (*Middle Ages** *strictly in the European chronological sense)*, it is utterly unsurprising that the ***degree of feudalization*** in Northern India was astronomically higher than in ***the Middle East***, especially the Iranian region.

The historical reality that Northern India stands as one of the exceedingly rare regions globally to successfully resurrect its indigenous religion after enduring protracted rule by Islamic regimes, serves as formidable collateral evidence for this point. Therefore, the **feudal system** under Islamic rule was absolutely not inherently incapable of adapting to its environment; it was perfectly capable of seamlessly accommodating localized conditions. This perfectly aligns with the conclusion from the previous chapter: Islamic ***doctrines*** and ***jurisprudence (religious law)*** are identically capable of absolute environmental adaptation.

Simultaneously, we can observe that although the **Iqta system (**伊克塔制度**)** undeniably trended toward hereditary transmission under the highly specific conditions of India, its progress in aggressively expanding land property rights (土地产权) remained agonizingly sluggish. As previously stated when discussing India's ***feudalization*** process, India's natural and humanistic environments were fundamentally antagonistic to the genesis of explicit, unambiguous consciousness regarding **land ownership (**土地所有权**)**. Consequently, the *Zamindars* (柴明达尔) possessed virtually zero economic incentive to engage in land improvement (土地改良).

In India, whatever historical progression the indigenous Indian society was organically capable of achieving, Islam—upon arrival—was forced to "hold its nose" (捏着鼻子) and adapt to it. Conversely, whatever structural transformations the indigenous society was fundamentally incapable of accomplishing, Islam was equally impotent to execute.

It was not until the British colonizers gradually subjugated the entire Indian subcontinent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that they forcefully legally designated the *Zamindars* as absolute land owners. Many of these immensely powerful *Zamindars* subsequently evolved into rulers of princely states (土邦) under British suzerainty—but this was a phenomenally recent, exogenous historical development.

Consequently, I conclude that the fundamental reason the **Iqta system** failed to organically evolve into the highly rigorous, meticulously structured feudal apparatus witnessed during the Western European ***High Middle Ages*** was, in the final analysis, that the Islamic world was cursed with several highly unfavorable natural and human geographical conditions. **Moreover, Heaven simply did not grant them sufficient developmental time.**

In the Islamic world of North Africa, excluding Egypt—namely, the Maghreb region (马格里布地区)—the progression of social development was inevitably even more agonizingly protracted. From a macroscopic geopolitical perspective, this region is essentially nothing more than a fractured, exceedingly narrow strip of habitable land sandwiched violently between the ocean and the desert-mountains. In many places, such as the Libyan region (利比亚地区), this narrow ribbon is physically severed. The dawn of civilization here was exponentially later than in ***the Near East***.

Furthermore, at the twilight of the first millennium AD, a colossal trade network suddenly materialized on the southern flank of the Maghreb, forcefully sucking the region into its vortex: this was the Trans-Saharan Trade (跨撒哈拉贸易). An endless torrent of gold from the mysterious lands of the south flowed relentlessly along commercial routes strung together by oases, ultimately pouring into the Mediterranean world.

Due to this massive commercial influx, ***feudalization*** in the Maghreb region was doomed to be exceptionally inconspicuous. ***Tribal groups*** **(**部族**)** or massive ***tribal confederacies*** perpetually monopolized towering positions within state politics, and the region remained excessively politically fragmented. Therefore, the phenomenon of ***feudalization*** here could only remain permanently locked in a highly primitive, embryonic state: merely acknowledging the ad hoc domination of land strictly in exchange for immediate military service.

22, The Superficial Revival of Classical Society in Andalusia

Under Muslim rule in Andalusia, observers can note a rare, yet unessential, phenomenon. During the Umayyad dynasty's rule over Spain, the classical morphology seemingly experienced a temporary resurrection in the southwestern corner of the European continent; the prosperity of the economy, culture, and arts brought immense prestige to Andalusia during this period. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and centuries of Visigothic entry and rule over this region, the emergence of such a situation in Andalusia under Muslim rule indeed readily arouses curiosity. I believe this should be understood from two aspects.

Firstly, the historical trajectory of the Iberian Peninsula inherently cannot be deemed identical to that of the core region of Western Europe, namely the French territories ruled by the Frankish Kingdom. The Iberian Peninsula is dominated by plateaus and mountains; the central Meseta Central alone occupies 60% of the entire peninsula's area. It is said that many American Western films were shot in the arid regions of central Spain, where the population density is extremely low. Were it not for the sanctuary provided by Iberia's complex topographical features, the Christian kingdoms in the northern part of the peninsula might not have survived the vanguard of the Islamic armies. However, as previously stated, the cover of such mountainous and plateau-strewn geographical environments easily allows a massive number of ***communities*** (社群) to remain detached from state administration, making it difficult for rulers to influence them. Regions with developed agricultural economies were located in river valleys or coastal areas along the peninsula's

periphery. This is a far cry from the conditions in France, where plains account for two-thirds of the national territory and are exceptionally suitable for agricultural production. During the ***early modern period*** from 1500 to 1700, although the area of the Iberian Peninsula was roughly comparable to that of mainland France, the population of the former was only about one-third of the latter's. Similarly distinguishing it from France, the Kingdom of Castile and the Spanish Kingdom lacked a fixed capital for a prolonged period, possessing only itinerant courts that moved with the monarch.

Prior to the Muslim conquest, the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process in Iberia under Visigothic rule was already proceeding rather slowly. If we take note of the history of the Visigoths themselves, this phenomenon is not the least bit surprising. This is because the Visigoths were precisely the first wave of ***barbarians*** (蛮族) to execute ***Ru Guan / Entering the Pass*** (入关) during the collapse of the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国). Having been in long-term contact with the empire, they understood its lifestyle, political architecture, and ideology; they could be considered "semi-Romanized" **acculturated barbarians** (**Foederati** / 熟番). Consequently, the Visigoths leaned towards trying their utmost to maintain the old systems of the empire. In an era of universal urban decay, the Visigoths constructed several new cities and preserved Roman-era urban culture, such as public baths. The Visigothic Kingdom produced a cohort of outstanding scholars, most notably Isidore of Seville (who is also one of the most well-known ***medieval*** European scholars in China); the aristocrats and rulers were well-educated and zealous about preserving classical culture. These facts point to an obvious conclusion: before the Muslims conquered the vast majority of the Iberian Peninsula, the ***degree of feudalization*** in this region was not high, and the characteristics of a **late-classical society** (晚期古典社会) still persisted to varying degrees.

Secondly, the new changes brought by the Muslim conquerors were also conducive to the formation of the zenith landscape of Andalusia in the 10th century under the rule of the Caliphate of Córdoba. For instance, there were diversified ***communities***, including the Umayyads who came here to rule, the Berbers and European Slavs who arrived as military forces, and the Jewish ***communities*** that played a pivotal role in international trade. Several new technologies from ***the Near East*** were introduced to the Iberian Peninsula, leading to substantial development in both agriculture and handicrafts. The Iberian Peninsula was integrated into the trade network of the Islamic world, and the inauguration and prosperity of the trans-Saharan trade brought massive quantities of precious metal currency to the Córdoba regime, which was adjacent to North Africa. These changes, to varying degrees, contained the ***natural economy*** (自然经济), allowing the splendor of a ***classical society*** to reappear in this corner of Europe. Abd al-Rahman III, who elevated the Umayyad regime from an Emirate to a Caliphate, fully utilized all the aforementioned favorable factors to consolidate central fiscal and military power in order to re-establish authority.

However, such prosperity ultimately could not guarantee the eternal preservation of the Umayyad dynasty's realm. The feudal ***manorial economy*** had, after all, already developed in Iberia, and it would not be thoroughly suppressed merely due to Muslim rule. The high degree of commercial

circulation in the ***medieval*** Islamic world could ultimately only serve as a hindrance to its progression toward an ***early modern*** and ***modern society***. The fact is that the Caliphate of Córdoba merely possessed the hollow shell of a ***classical empire***; in reality, it was completely incapable of organizing a "citizen army" like a ***genuine classical empire***. Militarily, the empire relied excessively on mercenaries and slave armies, which is inherently a characteristic of the terminal phase of ***classical empires***. (*The increasing dependence on mercenaries and slave armies reflected the state's inability to mobilize military resources directly from society.*) The Caliphate of Córdoba headed towards dissolution in the early 11th century, whereas the Christian kingdoms in the north—which had long been highly passive—genuinely began to develop a feudal system similar to other regions of Western Europe. Accompanied by the arrival of the ***High Middle Ages*** in Europe, the clarion call for the Christian reconquest of the peninsula was sounded.

23, A Renewed Critique of Byzantium

Although this obviously carries my strong personal emotional coloration, I must roast the Byzantine emperors: they are exactly **birds of a feather** (一丘之貉) with the monarchs of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期). As a state born amidst the tide of ***feudalization*** (封建化), Byzantium did not develop a Byzantine-style feudal system [封建制度] until the 11th century during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (阿莱克修斯·科穆宁一世), translated into Chinese as the Pronoia system (普罗尼亚制). The Pronoia system emerged later than the Iqta system [伊克塔制度], yet the two were exceedingly similar. Through the Pronoia system, the Byzantine emperor granted the usufruct [收益权] of the land to individuals; this right was non-transferable and not permitted to be hereditary, while the land ownership [土地所有权] still belonged to the emperor. Generally speaking, the grantee could enjoy the land's usufruct for life, but the emperor could still utilize ***despotic power*** [专制权力] to revoke the grant. Those granted Pronoia did not bear specific military obligations; the emperor could demand their participation in military campaigns, but this lacked institutionalization. This was certainly not because the Byzantine emperors were kind-hearted and protecting their ministers; the Byzantine emperors' calculations were fundamentally no different from those of Chinese monarchs: once the ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) was allowed to broadly shoulder military obligations, then absolutely nothing could prevent them from mutating into ***feudal lords*** (封建领主). Furthermore, if the grantees were "short-term tenants" rather than "long-term operators," they were highly likely to frantically exploit the land to reap profits before it was revoked, thereby accelerating the depletion of ***social efficiency*** (社会效率). Consequently, during the precarious era of late Byzantium, people witnessed a profoundly ludicrous situation: the Byzantine emperors would rather trust pagan mercenaries than take even a single step further toward ***feudalization*** in power relations. **This is indeed a profoundly Chinese-style ideology: rather let everyone lose than let anyone win; rather let outsiders rule than let one's**

own people gain power (宁可所有人都输，不能让任何人赢；宁可让外人统治，不能让自己人得势).

That the Byzantine emperors made certain compromises was merely the result of the development of the ***feudalization*** process, compounded by the intensified internal and external threats of domestic aristocratic rebellions and foreign invaders. We have every reason to believe that if the situation of the Byzantine Empire had genuinely improved during the Komnenian dynasty (科穆宁王朝), those aristocrats granted Pronoia would likely have been purged. After all, the Theme system (军区制) that emerged as early as the reign of the Heraclian dynasty (希拉克略王朝) had already exhibited glaring ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征) and had performed monumental meritorious deeds in resisting Islamic expansion. Yet, when the emperors of the Macedonian dynasty (马其顿王朝) deluded themselves into believing the empire had been resurrected, they exhausted every conceivable method to suppress those increasingly feudalized "provincial military warlords" [藩镇武人]. The empire adopted smaller and more flexible military units to launch counterattacks on the borders *(because the Arab Empire was actively disintegrating)*, and remuneration for military service reverted to cash payments rather than land grants. Doing so before the emergence of menacing enemies indeed fabricated a scene of thriving prosperity, but the profoundly deep military defensive system originally sculpted by the Theme system was destroyed *(which is precisely what many Southern Song officials urgently advocated constructing during the early Southern Song Dynasty)*. Byzantium stubbornly dragged its feet until even later than the Islamic world before adopting a ***quasi-feudal system*** (准封建制度) like Pronoia. Considering that it was even less close to a genuine feudal system than the Iqta system regarding the corresponding rights and obligations, its failure was absolutely irreversible.

By the time Michael VIII (米海尔八世) of the Palaiologan dynasty (巴列奥略王朝) recaptured Constantinople (君士坦丁堡) in 1261, he was forced to allow Pronoia to become inheritable; subsequently, Pronoia holders could even transfer their Pronoia to others. After the "baptism" of the Latin Crusaders (拉丁十字军), Byzantium finally presented the image of a Western European feudal state during its absolute final phase before death. But even when driven to such an absolute dead end, the Byzantine emperors still delusionally attempted to violently clutch the final shred of power in this empire that had practically nothing left. They still refused to grant *de facto* land ownership, retained the capacity to confiscate Pronoia utilizing ***despotic power***, and refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of hereditary succession—the inheritance of Pronoia required explicit approval, even if such approval was generally granted. With the state reduced to such a pathetic condition, imperial relatives were still relentlessly chasing the crown and throne propped up by a bureaucratic system that was dead but refusing to rot [死而不僵]; in reality, aside from power itself,

absolutely no other benefits remained there. Such actions—utterly indistinguishable from those of Chinese autocratic monarchs—coupled with their inherent incompetence and obsession with internal infighting, are more than enough to have many Byzantine emperors eternally engraved in human history as clowns. **Whoever refuses *feudalization* will be utterly defeated by those feudalized *Barbarians* (蛮族)—it is merely a matter of sooner or later.**

What evokes profound sighs is that the demise of Byzantium is perhaps more valuable than the ten centuries of this empire's existence. Because the failure of Byzantium irrefutably proves one point: the success of Western Europe was not due to the Christian faith, the ancient Greco-Roman classical heritage [古典遗产], or any other widely acknowledged characteristics of Western civilization generated prior to the ***High Middle Ages*** (封建盛期)—Byzantium identically possessed these exact characteristics. The sole reason modern Europe could emerge is that it embarked upon the correct historical trajectory, enabling its classical heritage to modernize alongside social development and to create new modern elements. **All thoughts, cultures, and *social concepts* (社会观念)—components that belong to the *superstructure* (上层建筑) in Marxist theory—are indeed absolutely sculpted by the morphology of *social existence* (社会存在).**

24, The Advantages and Disadvantages of Western Expansion, and the Problem of Pseudo-modernization

For the Islamic world—or more bluntly, for all nations excluding Europe and Japan—the absolute greatest fortune and simultaneously the most catastrophic misfortune was that the West, having ultimately transcended the ***Middle Ages*** and marched toward ***early modern*** civilization, could not possibly remain stagnant in its corner of the Eurasian landmass. Beginning in the 16th century, Europeans projected their influence with exponentially increasing intensity across the entire globe.

It was a fortune because Europeans brought advanced technology, ideologies, and political systems. For other relatively backward regions, these imported elements, at the very least, superficially appeared capable of propelling local societies forward. It was an explicit misfortune because Western influence *(particularly regarding weaponry, administrative systems, and economic apparatuses)* completely and violently amputated the spontaneous historical trajectories of these regions. *(This primarily refers to the **feudalization** process; for exceptionally primitive regions where generating civilization itself was a Herculean task, such interruption was largely irrelevant).*

Under these novel influences, the power of the central government relative to the localities multiplied astronomically. Consequently, we bear witness to a grotesque phenomenon: vast expanses of the globe find themselves trapped in a state of ***Pseudo-modernization*** (伪近 / 现代化). State power is rapidly compounding, yet the society as a whole has never undergone the exhaustive reorganization dictated by a complete **feudal stage**. The fundamental institutions and ideologies prerequisite for supporting ***early modern*** civilization are entirely absent.

The inorganic growth of state ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) inevitably birthed an even more formidable ***despotic power*** *(since no societal mechanism existed to constrain it)*. Society structurally lacked the conditions to internalize modern scientific thought, rendering it impossible for these nations to keep pace with Western technological advancement. In response, autocrats became increasingly inclined to amplify systematic exploitation to augment the power they could directly control.

For example, we can observe with absolute clarity the exact dynamics that unfolded within the Mughal Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Despite their ***feudalization*** (封建化) having fundamentally never reached its requisite climax—namely, a feudal apparatus analogous to the European ***Middle Ages***—the increasingly conspicuous Western influence in the 16th century triggered a massive "***ebb tide***" (退潮) in the ***feudalization*** of both empires.

During the reign of Emperor Akbar (阿克巴皇帝) of the Mughal Empire, a bureaucratic hierarchical system known as the **Mansabdar system** (曼萨布达尔制 / referring to the holder of a *mansab*) emerged, comprising approximately 33 distinct ranks. Although, theoretically, a Mansabdar could still be granted a *Jagir (now referred to as a Mansab)*, the Mansabdar system had intrinsically mutated into a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy. Different ranks of Mansabdars possessed varying degrees of power, status, and income. In stark contrast, the hierarchical classification of former *Iqta* holders was traditionally correlated strictly with the scale of military service provided.

The rule permitting the hereditary transmission of the *Jagirdar*, which had developed earlier during the Delhi Sultanate period, was systematically abolished under the Mansabdar system. The Mughal emperor monopolized the absolute power to grant, reduce, or entirely confiscate a Mansabdar's *Mansab*, exercising direct, unmediated control over this entire aristocracy.

Simultaneously, a feudal military benefice system known as the **Timar** (蒂马尔) emerged in the Ottoman Empire, held by cavalrymen known as the **Sipahi** (西帕希 / Spahi). In exactly parallel fashion, the *Timar* explicitly prohibited hereditary succession; absolute ownership of the land remained vested in the Sultan, and what was granted was merely the *usufruct* (收益权 / revenue rights). However, the holder of a *Timar* was permitted to employ professionals to assist in managing the fiefdom, as they possessed a degree of administrative authority and exercised partial police powers. If proper governance resulted in an increase in land cultivation and population, they were rewarded; if the land was abandoned, they faced punitive measures. This tightly intertwined the personal honor and disgrace of the *Sipahi* with the very land he governed.

From this highly specific perspective, the ***degree of feudalization*** in the Ottoman Empire might have been marginally higher than that of the Mughal Empire. However, in essence, there was virtually zero fundamental difference. The Ottoman Sultan retained the capacity to revoke and

redistribute land at will, deploying an exceptionally labyrinthine supervisory apparatus to investigate and distribute the *Timars*. The Ottoman Empire had already become hyper-bureaucratized. The situation of the Safavid Empire (萨菲帝国), viewed macroscopically, did not differ from its two contemporaries; Western scholars frequently prefer to categorize these three regimes into a single typology.

In my view, the problem of **"*Pseudo-modernization*"** remains irrevocably the single most severe international crisis of contemporary society—bar none. Anyone sketching the geopolitical map of all developed nations and regions today will effortlessly recognize this undeniable reality: they consist exclusively of European nations, Japan, and the colonies forged during the Age of Discovery.

The absolute foundation of early modernization was precisely the institutions, organizations, social contracts, and concepts forged in the crucible of the entire developmental process of the **feudal system** over Europe's millennium-long ***Middle Ages***. For all other nations that failed to complete this entire feudal process, what conceivable method exists under current conditions to "make up for the missed lessons" (把缺的课给补上)? After all, in today's era, it is fundamentally impossible to force these backward nations to replay the entire ***feudalization*** process from scratch. To date, no one on earth has proposed a satisfactory paradigm.

However, I must explicitly point out here: our nation fundamentally does not belong to those Afro-Asian countries that became universally "unfortunate" strictly due to the emergence of Western influence. For India and Turkey, if we hypothesize that European influence had never existed, and they were granted sufficient time, the historical trajectory strongly indicates an overwhelming probability that their ***feudalization*** processes would have continued to develop.

China is fundamentally different. The chronological point at which China mutated into a hyper-stable ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** **(**复辟官僚国家**)** occurred eons before Western influence ever arrived. This equates to China having committed societal suicide phenomenally early; all outsiders could subsequently do was flog the corpse (鞭尸)—no one could murder it a second time.

If anything rendered the already catastrophically unfortunate Chinese people even more unfortunate, it could only possibly be Soviet Russia, rather than Western nations in the conventional sense.

25, Nomadic Regimes and Feudalization, and Why the Xiongnu Were Disproportionately Formidable

Next, let us consider nomadic regimes. The focus here is not on regimes established by nomadic peoples who conquered agricultural production zones, but rather on regimes where nomadism constitutes the primary **production mode (**生产方式**)**.

It is glaringly evident that it is virtually impossible for a purely nomadic regime to organically develop a **feudal system** (封建体制), let alone a mature one analogous to Western Europe.

First, the feudal system is intrinsically predicated upon the control and occupation of land; land constitutes the ***primary factor of production*** **(**首位生产要素**)** and the absolute bedrock of the social power structure. For nomadic peoples, land functions primarily as a spatial locus for grazing livestock rather than a fixed means of production. Their primary concern is the ecological fluctuation of pastures, not concrete property rights over the land.

Second, nomadic production strictly relies on seasonal pastures. Even in the short term, the population exists in a state of perpetual migration; over the long term, demographic mobility becomes even more pronounced. This extreme hyper-mobility renders the establishment of a fixed land ownership system and a labyrinthine social hierarchy phenomenally difficult.

Third, the foundational cornerstone enabling the initial formation of a feudal system is a self-sufficient ***natural economy*** **(**自然经济**)**, with the **manor (**庄园**)** functioning as the basic economic unit, and where peasants are bound to the land with severely restricted personal freedom. A purely nomadic mode of production is fundamentally incapable of achieving genuine self-sufficiency. Meat and dairy cannot possibly fulfill all human nutritional requirements. Therefore, all regimes predicated primarily on nomadic production are structurally compelled to engage in frequent material exchanges with surrounding regimes—especially agricultural states—whether through violent or non-violent means.

Finally, the nomadic mode of production fundamentally struggles to establish a stable taxation apparatus, nor does it possess the capacity to provide substantive public services. At best, a nomadic ruler periodically extracts tribute from subordinate tribal chieftains and provides military protection in return. The inability to institutionalize a stable taxation system constitutes a terminal structural deficiency when attempting to organize a complex state. To overcome this, formidable nomadic rulers frequently resort to distributing the spoils of conquest wars to organize the state apparatus, but this is patently unsustainable. Once the regime suffers a catastrophic defeat, it is highly liable to disintegrate instantly. Conversely, if it secures enough victories, it is inevitably forced to mutate into a regime presiding over an overwhelmingly sedentary, agriculturally productive population.

To forcefully **feudalize** a nomadic society, one must irrevocably thrust it into a colossal market mechanism. This market must be capable of efficiently converting the ***social surplus*** (社会剩余) generated by pastoral production into currency and other commodities. Furthermore, it necessitates a formidable (external) power to rationally allocate and strictly demarcate pastures, thereby artificially maintaining a rigid social hierarchy.

If we examine the Mongolian region during the terminal phase of the Chinese imperial era, this exact mutation did, to a certain extent, occur.

First, during the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty, Altan Khan (俺答汗) negotiated a peace treaty with the Ming imperial government, terminating two centuries of protracted hostility between the Ming and the Mongols. With the formal opening of border markets *(though the smuggling of alcohol had never ceased)*, the Mongolian region was instantaneously integrated into a massive market network. Concurrently, the Mongols' second historical encounter with Tibet facilitated their mass conversion to Tibetan Buddhism, which at the time was already evolving into a ***feudalized religion*** **(**封建化宗教**)**.

Subsequently, the rising Qing Dynasty utilized a combination of military coercion and marital alliances to subsume both Inner and Outer Mongolia under its dominion, implementing the League and Banner system (盟旗制度). The term **Jasagh** (扎萨克 / Zasak) became the specific designation for hereditary ***feudal lords*** in the (Outer) Mongolian region during the Qing era. All mountains, rivers, forests, and fields within their fiefdoms were their absolute private property, and they bore zero corvée or tax obligations to the Qing central government. The *Jasagh* governed the populace within their fiefdoms, compelling them to pay taxes and perform corvée labor. The bonds of personal dependence (人身依附关系) were exceptionally rigid.

It must be recognized that the Qing Dynasty's ability to metamorphose Mongolia into a region dominated by a feudal system relied entirely upon two pillars: first, the Qing possessed an overwhelming military supremacy that ensured its policies could be coercively implemented; second, the Qing Dynasty itself had already been drawn into the vortex of the global market. The empire accumulated monumental trade surpluses through the treaty ports along its southeastern coast. The global trade network entered China through these nodes, traversed domestic commercial routes up to the Great Wall, and from there, Shanxi merchants (晋商) ventured north, crossing the entirety of Mongolia to reach Maimai-cheng (买卖城 / Kyakhta Trade City). This renowned border trade hub was situated on Qing territory south of the Kyakhta River, while the city of Kyakhta north of the river belonged to the Russian Empire. During the Sino-Russian trade of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Qing identically secured massive trade surpluses.

It was precisely under the conditions of this profound integration into the international market that the feudalized (Outer) Mongolian region managed to establish a stable taxation system. The *Regulations of the Lifanyuan* (《理藩院则例》), codified in the early years of the Shunzhi reign, stipulated highly diversified tax extraction methods for the *Jasagh* fiefdoms: those with many sheep paid directly in sheep; those with few sheep paid in rice; those with an exceptional abundance of sheep were additionally required to pay in carpets; and those possessing dairy cows had to provide butter and kumiss (乳油和乳酒).

However, the nomadic mode of production is fundamentally distinct from agriculture. The in-kind taxes paid in agricultural regions are merely grain seeds, requiring only physical storage space. Yet, under the nomadic production mode, once live livestock are surrendered as tax, one must immediately calculate whether the lord's directly administered lands possess the ecological carrying capacity to sustain that many cattle and sheep. After all, livestock require sustained consumption of grass and water. This biological reality inherently clashes with the rigid territorial boundaries demanded by a **feudal system**.

Consequently, by the late Qing Dynasty, the *Regulations of the Lifanyuan* completely abandoned the requirement to collect diverse physical goods. Regardless of the quantity of livestock a taxed household possessed, all dues were converted into rice based on a unified standard. Considering that the Outer Mongolian region produced virtually zero rice, the ability to collect taxes standardized in rice serves as definitive proof of the staggering ubiquity of Han Chinese merchants operating within Mongolia.

Nevertheless, such a feudal system undeniably held absolutely zero organic meaning for a nomadic region. The colossal, hyper-active, and highly monetized market upon which it relied could only possibly materialize in the wake of the ***early modern Age*** of Discovery—which, chronologically speaking, was excessively late. Not to mention, it required the continuous enforcement of an external hegemon.

Furthermore, judging from the historical realities of Mongolia's development during the Qing Dynasty, the feudal system was catastrophically incompatible with nomadic regions. For instance, the draconian restrictions forbidding herdsmen from crossing Banner borders to graze (越旗放牧)—was this not an explicit violation of the natural laws governing pastoralism? Over the more than two centuries of Qing rule in Mongolia, the entire region plunged into a catastrophic recession. The population plummeted, sexually transmitted diseases became rampant, and the aristocracy was universally mired in insurmountable debt. Even acknowledging that the initial stages of ***feudalization*** (封建化) genuinely tend to exhibit certain symptoms of decline, the catastrophic events that transpired in Qing-era Mongolia were blatantly pathological.

This tragic reality constitutes one of the historical reasons why Mongolia has harbored a prolonged estrangement from China and generated enduring anti-Chinese sentiments.

Similarly, logically speaking, it should be impossible for a nomadic region to experience a genuine ***classical period*** **(**古典时期**)**. The nomadic mode of production fundamentally struggles to effectively ameliorate the natural environment, and historically, the population carrying capacity of nomadic regions stagnated at a consistent level for prolonged periods. The impact of technological advancement was far inferior to even minor climatic shifts.

However, we indeed observe a highly anomalous phenomenon here: the **Xiongnu Empire** (匈奴帝国). As the first nomadic empire to unify the Mongolian Plateau and its peripheries, the military manpower and political cohesion it could mobilize were disproportionately formidable.

What is most perplexing is that the Xiongnu regime genuinely exhibited certain "***classical characteristics***." For instance, among the various nomadic peoples migrating back and forth across northern China, the Xiongnu were exceptionally proficient in constructing walled settlements (筑城). Thus far, archaeological excavations have unearthed nearly thirty Xiongnu settlements, stretching from south of Lake Baikal down into Inner Mongolia. From the fall of the Xiongnu right up to the rise of the Mongols, no other nomadic regime is known to have constructed such a multitude of walled settlements in the northern Chinese pastoral regions. It is highly probable that even the unified Mongolian Empire under Genghis Khan could not compare in this specific regard.

The Xiongnu also utilized precious metals like gold far more extensively than subsequent nomadic peoples. Of course, a stark difference remains between this and a ***genuine classical empire***: in ***classical empires***, precious metals circulated as functional currency, whereas expecting such a highly developed monetary economy in a nomadic region 2,200 years ago is unrealistic. The Xiongnu generally utilized gold as funerary objects (陪葬品) for the high aristocracy.

The armaments of this nomadic regime were equally sophisticated. Unearthed weapons are predominantly composed of bronze and iron *(though one cannot exclude the possibility that non-metallic weapons simply failed to preserve)*, and Xiongnu brick-and-tile kilns (砖瓦窑址) and iron-smelting sites have also been discovered. Judging from the historical records of the Han Dynasty, the Han clearly recognized the terrifying martial prowess of the Xiongnu as an adversary, asserting that the Xiongnu soldiers were "entirely armored cavalry" (尽为甲骑 / primarily utilizing leather armor) and were exceptionally skilled in equestrian combat.

The relative economic independence of the Xiongnu regime is equally a highly bizarre phenomenon. As previously mentioned, it is structurally impossible for a purely nomadic mode of production to achieve self-sufficiency; nomadic inhabitants are compelled to engage in commodity exchange with the outside world to sustain their survival. Yet, it is widely known that both the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》) and the *Book of Han* (《汉书》) explicitly record the

following historical event. Zhonghang Yue (中行说), a Han defector who sought refuge with the Xiongnu, observed that the Laoshang Chanyu (老上单于) was overly fond of the silk and food sent by the Han Dynasty through the *Heqin* (和亲 / peace-making marriage) policy.

Zhonghang Yue consequently advised the Chanyu, arguing that the fundamental reason the Xiongnu maintained military superiority over the Han was precisely because their customs regarding food and clothing differed from the Han people, and that they "did not rely upon the Han" (无仰于汉). He warned that if the Xiongnu altered their indigenous customs, the Han could effortlessly bribe and subvert the Xiongnu populace. He advised the Chanyu to discard the gifts sent by the Han to demonstrate the superiority of the Xiongnu's own way of life. Consequently, the Laoshang Chanyu came to value Zhonghang Yue even more profoundly.

Although border trade (边市贸易) between the Han and Xiongnu persistently existed to some degree—in fact, the famous Mayi Trap (马邑之谋) utilized a major border trade hub as bait—the fact that Zhonghang Yue possessed the confidence to articulate the phrase "do not rely upon the Han" strongly implies that the Xiongnu's development in industries beyond mere pastoralism had likely become quite substantial.

Furthermore, even though the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the *Book of Han* merely provide abbreviated accounts of the Xiongnu's bureaucratic apparatus, it is not difficult to discern that such a hierarchical system was phenomenally overly complex for a 2nd-century BC nomadic empire.

One particularly shocking aspect is that, although the political structure of the **Xiongnu Empire** remained fundamentally predicated on pasture allocation, it possessed a characteristic highly resembling the rotating bureaucratic appointment system (流官) that is exceptionally rare among nomadic peoples. Take, for example, the *Tuqi* King of the Left (左贤王 / Wise King of the Left), which was the highest aristocratic title and simultaneously the official position governing the vast eastern territories of the Xiongnu (匈奴左地). The appointment of the *Tuqi* King of the Left was manipulated almost entirely by the reigning Chanyu; the Chanyu could even arbitrarily alter the very title of the "Tuqi King of the Left."

Generally, the *Tuqi* King of the Left was held by the Crown Prince. However, on the one hand, the Chanyu possessed the **absolute despotic power** to change the heir apparent or execute the first-in-line successor to the *Tuqi* King of the Left. On the other hand, if a newly ascended Chanyu had not previously served as the *Tuqi* King of the Left, he could absolutely demote the sons of the former *Tuqi* King of the Left and appoint his own brother or son to the position. It must be understood that the *Tuqi* King of the Left was an immensely powerful figure, even when viewed on a global scale at the time. At its absolute zenith, this position could mobilize seventy to eighty thousand cavalrymen,

and even after suffering repeated catastrophic defeats, it could still field thirty thousand combat-ready cavalry.

At least according to Chinese historical records, the Xiongnu royal house firmly grasped the administrative control and military command of various fiefdoms strictly through the centralized appointment of the high aristocracy. This is an astonishing reality for a nomadic people. Even after Genghis Khan unified Mongolia, the so-called **Ulus** (兀鲁思 / the Mongolian term for people and fiefdom) were inherited hereditarily by the ennobled princes. The Great Khan was fundamentally incapable of exercising the **absolute despotic power** to arbitrarily strip titles and fiefdoms in the manner the Chanyu once did.

In fact, it is easy to observe that this bureaucratic system of the **Xiongnu Empire** already bore a striking resemblance to ***early classical empires***. For instance, the Maurya Dynasty in India adopted an identical system where princes were dispatched to govern provinces *(the Maurya Dynasty had very few provinces, currently estimated at roughly four to six)*, and the governor of a crucial province might simultaneously hold the status of heir apparent.

If one evaluates this from the perspective of the Chinese Empire, one could naturally ridicule the primitiveness and crudeness of this bureaucratic system. However, for a regime whose primary mode of production was nomadism, achieving such a structure was genuinely unfathomable.

A particularly easily overlooked key point is that the Xiongnu were quite similar to the contemporaneous Han people in terms of religion, and the Xiongnu were highly adept at utilizing religion.

The religious center of the **Xiongnu Empire** was "Longcheng" (茏城). This was the location of the largest of the three routine annual gatherings held in the fifth month, where various tribes congregated to sacrifice to their ancestors, Heaven, Earth, and spirits. *(During the first month, tribal chieftains arrived at the Royal Court of the Chanyu [单于庭] for a minor gathering, perhaps involving the formulation of plans for the new year and winter relief issues. In autumn, when people and livestock multiplied, another large-scale gathering was held; they conducted sacrificial ceremonies surrounding forests and tallied the population and livestock numbers of the tribes).*

The isolated appearance of this event in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》) presents no issue, but looking across the entirety of ancient Chinese documentary records, it becomes completely incomprehensible. The Xiongnu Chanyu, as the supreme ruler of a nomadic empire, was actually capable of routinely convening his primary subordinates three times a year. The cohesive and convening role played by Longcheng as the religious center of the **Xiongnu Empire** did not reappear in any nomadic regime for over 1,300 years after the Xiongnu were defeated by the Han Dynasty, not until the Mongols constructed Karakorum.

And such routine, high-frequency activities bearing the nature of pilgrimages and confederate assemblies, which persisted for nearly a century, never reappeared after the Xiongnu. Even during the era when the Qing Dynasty comprehensively ruled Mongolia, the Inner *Jasagh* (内扎萨克) were only required to make a pilgrimage to the Qing's **Boghda Khan** (博格达汗) once every three years; the league assembly activities were initially held once a year, and were later relaxed even further.

Corresponding to this excessively formidable ruling power, the status bestowed upon the Chanyu himself within the ***social consciousness*** also possessed a certain divinity. He "*worshipped the sun in the morning and the moon in the evening,*" (朝拜日，夕拜月) claiming to be "established by Heaven." Recently unearthed Xiongnu eaves tiles (瓦当) in Mongolia are also inscribed with the four characters "Son of Heaven, Chanyu" (天子单于). This ideology was clearly highly consistent with the so-called "Son of Heaven" in ***the Central Plains*** (中原), and the Xiongnu specifically emphasized this point during diplomacy with the Han Dynasty to assert parity.

The Xiongnu placed great importance on tombs. Archaeological discoveries reveal an emphasis on lavish burials; the scale of the mausoleums was exceptionally large relative to a nomadic regime. The largest Xiongnu tomb excavated to date is almost exactly the same size as the Qin Duke No. 1 Tomb (秦公一号大墓). This attitude toward funerals and burials was also consistent with China at the time.

The Xiongnu, like the Han people, believed that spirits existed after death *(without distinguishing between friend or foe)* and could send down fortune or misfortune, necessitating the pacification of malevolent spirits. For example, after the Han general Li Guangli (李广利) was executed by the Xiongnu Chanyu, he was deemed a malevolent spirit due to a series of subsequent natural disasters; the Xiongnu felt fear and consequently offered sacrifices to Li Guangli's spirit to pacify it. A famous spirit officially sacrificed to by the Han Dynasty was named "Qin Zhong" (秦中); Qin Zhong was the Second Emperor of Qin, Huhai. This was identically to prevent the spirit from causing trouble.

The Xiongnu also engaged in agricultural production, and a large number of iron agricultural tools have even been unearthed, which exhibit no difference in shape and structure from those of the Han Dynasty. Naturally, judging from the iron-smelting sites, the Xiongnu's iron-smelting technology had already diverged from that of ***the Central Plains*** during the Qin and Han periods. However, this was highly likely caused by further developments in iron-smelting technology within ***the Central Plains*** following a polarization; after all, from the late Warring States period to the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty, China's iron-smelting technology indeed experienced explosive growth.

My contention is that a nomadic region itself naturally would not experience a ***classical empire*** stage. The reason the various incomprehensible characteristics of the Xiongnu emerged at that time was because the **Xiongnu Empire** itself was forged by the conspicuous spillover of the **Hua-Xia people**'s "***Great Expansion***" (大扩张) process at the eastern end of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** (欧亚大草原).

Here, I will use an extensively recorded and highly typical example from our nation's documentary sources to illustrate this point: specifically, the event in the spring of the second year of the Yuanshou era (121 BC) when Huo Qubing (霍去病) launched his first major offensive into the Hexi Corridor and captured the Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven (祭天金人) from the Xiongnu's Xiutu tribe (休屠部). Here, as long as no glaring contradictions appear within the documentary records, we will provisionally assume them to be accurate.

Following the chronological order of appearance in the documents, the Xiongnu Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven first appears in the *Records of the Grand Historian: Account of the Xiongnu* (《史记·匈奴列传》), describing when Huo Qubing first breached the Hexi region and captured this object. Both the *Shiji Jijie*（《史记集解》） and the *Shiji Zhengyi*（《史记正义》） provided highly consistent annotations: namely, the location where the Xiongnu originally worshipped Heaven was at the foot of Ganquan Mountain (甘泉山), northwest of Yunyang County *(present-day Chunhua County, Xianyang City, a straight-line distance of 100 kilometers from urban Xi'an)*.

Later, the State of Qin captured this area *(judging from the process of Qin attacking and annihilating the Yiqu [义渠], it was perhaps occupied during the reign of King Huiwen of Qin)*.

Subsequently, the sacrificial location was relocated to the "Right Land of the Xiutu" (休屠右地) *(which should refer to the territory of the Xiutu tribe; the "right land" refers to the west from a north-to-south-facing perspective relative to the Royal Court of the Chanyu)*. Therefore, the Xiutu King retained this Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven, and this golden man ought to symbolize the image of the Heavenly God.

However, here the *Shiji Suoyin* (《史记索隐》), quoting the *Shiji Yinyi* （《史记音义》）, claims that the Xiongnu *(though, of course, they were not yet uniformly called Xiongnu at that time)* were already using the golden man when they worshipped Heaven at Ganquan Mountain. Yet, it expresses disagreement with this assertion, maintaining instead that the Han Dynasty only placed the golden man at Ganquan for sacrifice after having captured it.

Faced with the important sacrificial props and religious symbols of the Xiongnu (匈奴人), the Han people (汉朝人), despite being their mortal enemies, showed considerable enthusiasm and respect. The *Hanwu Gushi* (《汉武故事》), the most important unofficial history regarding Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝), states: "*Having captured the Golden Man of the Heavenly Sacrifice, the Emperor considered it a great deity and arrayed it in the Ganquan Palace. The man was generally over a zhang tall; they did not offer sacrifices or prayers, but only burned incense and worshipped. The Heavenly Sacrifice was eight chi long, holding up the sun and moon, and was sacrificed to with cattle. The Emperor ordered it to be worshipped according to its local customs. The fangshi all believed it was a* ***barbarian*** *deity, unsuitable to be in the center, and so it was stopped.*" (“获天祭金人，上以为大神，列于甘泉宫。人率长丈余，不祭祝，但烧香礼拜。天祭长八尺，擎日月，祭以牛。上令依其方俗礼之，方士皆以为夷狄鬼神，不宜在中，因乃止。”)

There are many extra details here, indicating that the "Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven" (祭天金人) was not a single object. The "Golden Man" (金人) was a metal human statue approximately two and a half meters tall, while the "Heavenly Sacrifice" (天祭) was an unknown object about two meters long. Judging from the method of sacrifice, the Golden Man (金人) was clearly more essential; from the size comparison and the function of the "Heavenly Sacrifice" (天祭) holding up the sun and moon, the "Heavenly Sacrifice" appeared to be a tool used by the Heavenly God—represented by the Golden Man—to maintain the operation of the world.

Later, Wei Shou (魏收) provided a similar account in the *Wei Shu: Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism* (《魏书 释老志》) (likely derived from the *Hanwu Gushi* [《汉武故事》]), but claimed that the Golden Man (金人) here was a Buddhist statue and omitted the content regarding the "Heavenly Sacrifice" (天祭). This selection clearly had a purpose. In 121 BC, Buddhist statue art was only just beginning to develop, let alone the possibility of cast-metal Buddhist statues appearing in the hands of the Xiongnu (匈奴人). To make people believe the Golden Man (金人) was genuinely a Buddhist statue, Wei Shou (魏收) had to remove the unidentifiable "Heavenly Sacrifice" (天祭), otherwise people would immediately know it was not a Buddhist statue.

Interestingly, although the Xiutu King (休屠王) and the Hunxie King (浑邪王) agreed to surrender to the Han Dynasty but the former was killed by the latter midway, the Xiutu King's eldest son, Jin Midi (金日磾), was later highly regarded by Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝). He was continuously

promoted to Imperial Household Grandee (光禄大夫) and designated as Huo Guang's (霍光) deputy to assist the young Emperor Zhao of Han, Liu Fuling (汉昭帝刘弗陵). In the final "Appraisal" (赞曰) section of the *Book of Han: Biographies of Huo Guang and Jin Midi* (《汉书霍光金日磾传》), the author Ban Gu (班固) wrote: "*Originally, because the Xiutu made the Golden Man as the lord of heavenly sacrifice, he was thus bestowed the surname Jin [Gold].*" (“本以休屠作金人为祭天主，故因赐姓金氏云。”)

This record is very crucial. It not only mentions why Jin Midi (金日磾) was bestowed the surname Jin, but also explicitly points out that the Xiongnu Xiutu tribe (匈奴休屠部) possessed the capability to manufacture golden men (金人). That Jin Midi (金日磾) himself could be highly regarded by Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝) naturally involved his loyalty and competence. However, for a foreign prince to achieve the status of a regent minister entrusted with an orphaned emperor (托孤大臣), we cannot rule out that this was related to his background as the Xiutu prince.

Of course, astute readers will also clearly notice the act of sacrificing cattle to the "Heavenly Sacrifice" (天祭). Looking at our nation's history, the practice of killing both cattle and horses during sacrifices simultaneously existed for both the sedentary ***peoples of the Central Plains*** (中原民族) and the northern nomadic peoples (北方游牧民族). But relatively speaking, horses were more important to nomadic peoples, while killing cattle was more common for the people of ***the Central Plains***, and over time, ***the Central Plains*** regions placed less and less emphasis on killing horses. This perhaps already hints at the origins of the Xiutu tribe (休屠部). However, because we do not know whether Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝) worshipped exactly according to the Xiongnu's original sacrificial methods or substituted his own, and considering the *Hanwu Gushi* (《汉武故事》) is not an official history (正史) after all, we will not discuss it further.

What is more bizarre is that the Xiutu King (休屠王), as a Xiongnu grand chieftain who reneged midway while surrendering to the Han and was killed, actually enjoyed sacrifices throughout the Han Dynasty. The *Book of Han* (《汉书》) records this information in two separate places: first in the *Treatise on Sacrifices, Part II* (《郊祀志下》), and second in the *Treatise on Geography, Part I* (《地理志上》). The *Treatise on Sacrifices, Part II* (《郊祀志下》), when writing about important sacrificial sites in counties near the capital during Emperor Xuan of Han's (汉宣帝) reign, states:

"In Yunyang, there is the Shrine of the Jinglu Spirit, where the Xiutu King is sacrificed to" (“云阳有径路神祠，祭休屠王也”). This indicates that sacrificial activities existed there at the time. Yan Shigu (颜师古) annotated that this Jinglu Spirit (径路神) was originally a god worshipped by the Xiongnu.

The *Treatise on Geography, Part I* (《地理志上》), when writing about the Zuofengyi (左冯翊) region, finally mentioned Yunyang County (云阳县), stating it "*has three shrines: the Xiutu, the Golden Man, and the Jinglu Spirit, and three shrines for Yue shamans: [character], [character].*" (“有休屠、金人及径路神祠三所，越巫〈卯古〉〈襄阝＞祠三所。”). Ignoring those three shrines of the southern Yue people (南方越人), Wang Xianqian (王先谦) (the author of the *Supplementary Annotations to the Book of Han* [《汉书补注》]) annotated here that the so-called "Jinglu" (径路) was the name of the Xiutu King (休屠王), who became a god after death; the Xiongnu worshipped him in the past, and now the Han Dynasty continued it. It was not a sacrifice to a precious sword called the "Jinglu sword" (径路刀), which earned its name because it was left behind by the Jinglu Spirit (径路神).

If we now search for this "Jinglu sword" (径路刀), we find it appears in a very important place. The *Book of Han: Account of the Xiongnu, Part II* (《汉书 匈奴传下》) records that during the reign of Emperor Yuan of Han (汉元帝), Han officials Han Chang (韩昌) and Zhang Meng (张猛) established an alliance with the Huhanye Chanyu (呼韩邪单于): "*Chang, Meng, the Chanyu, and the ministers all ascended the East Mountain of the Nuo River in Xiongnu territory, sacrificed a white horse, the Chanyu used the Jinglu sword and a gold spoon to stir the wine, and using the skull of the Yuezhi King, whom the Laoshang Chanyu had defeated, as a drinking vessel, they collectively drank the blood oath.*" (“昌、猛与单于及大臣俱登匈奴诺水东山，刑白马，单于以径路刀金留犁挠酒，以老上单于所破月氏王头为饮器者共饮血盟”).

Here, to demonstrate his high regard for the alliance with the Han Dynasty, the Chanyu brought out an ancestral treasure of the Xiongnu royal family. He used the Jinglu sword (径路刀) to carve words onto a rice spoon (饭匕) (presumably swearing never to betray the alliance), stirred the rice spoon in the wine vessel, and then poured the wine into the wine bowl made from the Yuezhi King's (月氏王) skull and drank it (according to Yan Shigu [颜师古] quoting Ying Shao [应劭] of the Eastern Han).

Although such a bizarre ritual might seem quite ridiculous to people today, at the time, it was indeed the highest courtesy the Chanyu could offer. The Han Dynasty's reaction to this was very interesting. After hearing about this, Han officials unanimously agreed: "Forming an alliance is acceptable, but the curse is too severe, and the alliance ritual is too solemn, leaving the Han Dynasty with absolutely no room to maneuver. We should sacrifice to Heaven again to dissolve this alliance, and punish the two envoys." ("结盟可以，但是赌咒太狠，结盟的仪式太过郑重，汉朝毫无回转的余地。应当再次祭告上天解除这个盟约，并且惩罚两个使者"). At that time, the Han Dynasty absolutely no longer considered the Xiongnu a peer adversary capable of standing on equal footing, and did not wish to establish an alliance oath with them that was too severely worded.

Another thought-provoking matter is the surrender of the Hunxie King (浑邪王) and the Xiutu King (休屠王) in the autumn of the second year of the Yuanshou era (元狩二年秋天), following Huo Qubing's (霍去病) two major devastating strikes against the Xiongnu (匈奴人) in the Hexi region (河西地区). Regarding this event, the five accounts in the official histories (正史) are not consistent.

The *Records of the Grand Historian: Account of the Xiongnu* (《史记 匈奴列传》) indicates that the Chanyu (单于), furious that the two kings, Hunxie and Xiutu, were severely defeated by the Han army (汉军) twice within half a year, wanted to recall and kill them. It did not specify who was to be killed; from the semantics, it should imply killing both kings. These two Xiongnu kings felt fear and plotted to surrender to the Han Dynasty (汉朝); Huo Qubing went to receive them. The Hunxie King killed the Xiutu King, annexed the latter's tribesmen, and then surrendered to the Han Dynasty, but it did not explain the reason for the killing.

The *Biographies of the General of Chariots and Cavalry and the General of Agile Cavalry* (《卫将军骠骑列传》) specifies that the Chanyu wanted to kill the Hunxie King and had no intention of killing the Xiutu King. It completely omits any record of the Xiutu King being killed. By the time the Hunxie King dispatched an envoy to negotiate with the Director of Guests, Li Xi (大行令李息), the Xiutu King was no longer mentioned. However, it added the detail of Huo Qubing using military force to deal with the Hunxie King's tribesmen who did not want to submit to the Han.

The record in the *Book of Han: Account of the Xiongnu, Part I* (《汉书 匈奴传上》) is completely identical to the *Records of the Grand Historian: Account of the Xiongnu*, and the *Biographies of Wei*

Qing and Huo Qubing (《卫青霍去病传》) is completely identical to the *Biographies of the General of Chariots and Cavalry and the General of Agile Cavalry.*

The *Biographies of Huo Guang and Jin Midi* (《霍光金日磾传》) explicitly states that the Chanyu wanted to kill both kings, hence the two kings plotted to surrender to the Han Dynasty. However, the Xiutu King regretted it; the Hunxie King killed him, annexed his tribesmen, and then surrendered to the Han Dynasty alone. It was precisely because the Xiutu King regretted and refused to surrender, thus being killed, that Jin Midi (金日磾), along with his mother and younger brother, initially entered Emperor Wu of Han's (汉武帝) court to serve in the status of official slaves (官奴).

Later, Jin Midi was highly regarded by Emperor Wu of Han. After his mother passed away, Emperor Wu issued an edict to have her portrait painted and stored in the Ganquan Palace (甘泉宫), still referring to her title as the "Yanzhi of the Xiutu King" (“休屠王阏氏”). But regardless, the Yizhixie Chanyu (伊稚斜单于) was clearly infuriated by this event. In the spring of the following year, he launched a rare, large-scale attack on the Han border during Emperor Wu's reign from the Eastern Xiongnu territories (匈奴左地) (which was the right flank from the Han Dynasty's perspective). This point is highly unusual because spring is the mating season for livestock. The Xiongnu very rarely initiated wars at this time, otherwise the damage to pastoral production would be immense; conversely, it was the Han army that was accustomed to attacking in the spring.

Next, let us return to the most frequently appearing location in this entire story: Ganquan (甘泉).

There are very many records regarding this place in official historical documents (正史文献). Later generations have already collected much information when annotating and writing other works, so I will not list the sources of information one by one. When readers wish to verify, they might directly consult the *Sanfu Huangtu* (《三辅黄图》); as a geographical book, it has already compiled detailed summaries and explicitly stated the sources.

The *Chang'an Zhi* (《长安志》) quotes the *Sanfu Gushi* (《三辅故事》), stating that the Ganquan Palace is "*three hundred li away from Chang'an, yet one can gaze upon Chang'an city. It has been the location of the Circular Mound for worshipping Heaven since the Yellow Emperor / Huangdi.*" (“去长安三百里，望见长安城。黄帝以来圜丘祭天处。”). This directly pushes the religious rituals of worshipping Heaven in the Ganquan region back to the legendary era, specifically to the Yellow Emperor (黄帝), who was already universally recognized during the Han Dynasty as the ancestor of the **Hua-Xia people** (华夏族). The *Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices* (《封禅

书》) also states: "*Thereafter, the Yellow Emperor received the myriad spirits at the Mingting. The Mingting is Ganquan.*" (“其后黄帝接万灵明廷。明廷者，甘泉也。”).

Since the Qin Dynasty (秦代), the importance of the Ganquan region increased daily. Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin (秦国宣太后) lured and assassinated the Yiqu King (义渠王) here, and thus the Qin Dynasty completely annihilated the Yiqu (义渠). (At this time, Ganquan was already on the border between the two states under Qin's control, so the seizure of this place during the reign of King Huiwen of Qin [秦惠文王] should be reliable). After the State of Qin (秦国) unified the realm, the Ganquan region became the starting point of the Qin Straight Road (秦直道) leading to the north. Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) first initiated palace construction, but like the Epang Palace (阿房宫), he passed away before the project was completed. It was basically completed during the reign of the Second Emperor of Qin (秦二世), and the palace was named Linguang Palace (林光宫). After the establishment of the Han Dynasty, it inherited the palaces and imperial parks of the Qin Empire. After Emperor Wu of Han ascended the throne, he vastly expanded the scale of construction in the Ganquan region, and the Ganquan Palace, bearing the name Ganquan, ushered in its zenith era.

From the perspective of practical politics, the Ganquan Palace was the venue where the emperor spent the second longest amount of time, surpassed only by the Weiyang Palace (未央宫). It was the summer palace of the Han Dynasty and the location where many major events and significant decisions occurred. From the perspective of religious status, Ganquan occupied an extremely high position in the imperial faith of that time, because Emperor Wu of Han constructed the Circular Mound (圜丘) for worshipping Heaven here. Comparing various historical materials, this Circular Mound for worshipping Heaven should be the Tai Zhi (泰畤) for sacrificing to Taiyi (泰一). Throughout the entire Heaven-worshipping activities, Taiyi was worshipped as the principal deity (i.e., the Heavenly God).

The sacrificial activities recorded in documents were massive in scale and deeply mysterious, and they were conducted at night, lasting from nightfall until early the next morning. However, this is understandable, because Taiyi was regarded as the North Star (北极星) at that time, and it is difficult to observe during the day. In the century from Emperor Wu to Emperor Cheng (汉成帝), Ganquan was the most important religious center of the Han Empire, followed by the Shrine of Houtu (后土祠) in Fenyin of Hedong (河东汾阴). Emperor Wu of Han ordered the construction of numerous buildings related to religious rituals here and concentrated auspicious objects. Aside from

the actual activities of sacrificing to the Heavenly God Taiyi (天神泰一), various minor sacrifices were also extremely frequent.

The records regarding this place in the official histories already possess quite a mystical tendency. In unofficial histories (野史) like the *Hanwu Gushi* (《汉武故事》), it would actually appear abnormal if the Ganquan Palace lacked supernatural phenomena. The Ganquan Palace occupied a very important position in the politics regarding the Xiongnu. This was not only during the period of massive counteroffensives against the Xiongnu. After the Northern and Southern Xiongnu (南北匈奴) moved toward schism, the Huhanye Chanyu's (呼韩邪单于) imperial audience with the Han Emperor (i.e., Emperor Xuan of Han [汉宣帝]) took place precisely at the Ganquan Palace. This was the first meeting between a Xiongnu Chanyu and a Han Son of Heaven (汉朝天子) since Liu Bang (刘邦) was besieged at Baideng (白登), and it was in the form of the Chanyu submitting to the Emperor.

So what about the "Golden Man" (金人)? Obviously, the appearance of the Golden Man in our nation's documentary sources is not limited solely to the Xiongnu's Golden Man for worshipping Heaven.

In the *Shuoyuan: Jingshen* (《说苑·敬慎》) authored by Liu Xiang (刘向) of the Han Dynasty (汉代), it states: "*When Confucius went to Zhou and observed the Grand Temple, there was a Golden Man before the right steps. Its mouth was sealed three times, and an inscription on its back read: 'This is a man of ancient times who was careful with his words; beware! beware! Do not speak much, for much speaking leads to much failure.*'" (“孔子之周，观于太庙，右陛之前有金人焉，三缄其口而铭其背曰：‘古之慎言人也；戒之哉！戒之哉！无多言，多言多败’”). This passage also coined the idiom "keeping one's mouth shut tight" (三缄其口). After Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) unified China, he confiscated all the weapons in the realm and cast them into twelve Golden Men to suppress rebellion in various regions.

What is even more fascinating is that the Xianbei (鲜卑族)—the second ethnic group to unify the Mongolian Plateau (蒙古高原) after the Xiongnu—retained the custom of "casting golden men by hand" (手铸金人) right up until they unified northern China. Naturally, this custom was not exclusive to the Xianbei; it seems to have been widely prevalent among the various *Hu* (胡族 / northern nomadic peoples) who entered ***the Central Plains*** (中原) since the end of the Jin Dynasty

(晋末). For instance, the Yan King Murong Jun (燕王慕容儁) *(who had not yet claimed the imperial title at this time, doing so only after destroying the Ran Wei [冉魏] regime)* rebuked an envoy sent by Ran Min (冉闵), stating that Ran Min himself had attempted to cast a golden man by hand and failed, so how dare he claim the Mandate of Heaven (天命)?

Judging from the term "cast by hand," the ultimately cast bronze figures must not have been very large. Yet even so, the probability of failure remained exceptionally high, which is why it existed as a method of divination for fortune and misfortune. The northern *Hu* peoples were particularly convinced by this form of divination. During the late Northern Wei Dynasty (北魏末年), Erzhu Rong (尔朱荣) had already monopolized absolute power over the realm, yet he still dared not usurp the throne simply because he failed to cast a golden man by hand. By this time, over seven centuries had passed since the Xiongnu first unified the various tribes of the steppe.

Considering the relatively harsh environment of the steppe regions, the level of metallurgical casting for metal implements was likely not high, nor was it easily popularized. If, in the distant antiquity prior to the Xiongnu unification, a particular tribe was capable of casting *(or had acquired)* a bronze man significantly larger than a living person, gleaming under the sun, and weighing over a metric ton—*(referencing the bronze statue of the Elamite Queen [埃兰王后青铜像] currently housed in the Louvre, which was cast according to life-size proportions. According to the records of the Hanwu Gushi [《汉武故事》], the Xiongnu's Golden Man was even larger. If it were truly solid, it could weigh several tons; however, if it were a hollow standing human figure like those found at Sanxingdui [三星堆], it could not possibly be that heavy. Moreover, if readers have actually seen the large bronze standing figure of Sanxingdui online or in a museum, it is glaringly obvious from the position and posture of the bronze man's hands that it seemingly once held something, and the statue is genuinely 2.6 meters tall. Considering geographical factors, I believe the Xiongnu Golden Man should be closer to the latter)*—this would inevitably inflict a colossal psychological shock upon the various nomadic tribes of northern China.

It is completely unsurprising that such a massive bronze artifact on the ***Eurasian Steppe*** (欧亚大草原) during the BC era would be revered as the physical manifestation of a deity, garnering unified worship across a vast territory and serving as a political instrument to unite various tribes.

Now we have essentially acquired all the information related to this "case," and I believe the answer is already overwhelmingly apparent. Next, I will reconstruct the history of the Xiongnu Xiutu tribe (匈奴休屠部) to see if we can provide a plausible explanation that is not self-contradictory.

Considering the existence of the **Holocene Climatic Optimum** (全新世暖期), the climate in northern China during high antiquity was significantly warmer and more humid than it is today, and the distribution of primitive settlements skewed further north *(based on current population density standards)*. The archaeological results of prehistoric sites have also confirmed this. The rivers in the plains were turbulent and prone to flooding, so when people chose to build settlements, they tended toward sloping terrain.

The later Ganquan Mountain (甘泉山) region *(note: this is not the Ganquan County [甘泉县] that currently falls under the administrative jurisdiction of Yan'an City)* was highly likely the religious center of a formidable ***tribal confederacy*** (部族联盟) in northern China. Across an exceedingly vast area, people universally regarded it as a sacred site for sacrifices, and this very ***tribal confederacy*** constituted the primary corpus of the subsequent **Hua-Xia people** (华夏族).

In that distant epoch, the nomadic mode of production (游牧生产方式) had not yet emerged, because horses had not yet been domesticated, and it took time for this technology to transmit into China. As the climate shifted, our nation's civilizational center began to migrate southward. The regimes established by the tribes that entered ***the Central Plains*** region grew powerful, occupying an increasingly dominant advantage in terms of economy and population, and became the cradle of new technologies. These political mutations altered the political status of the tribes that remained in the regions north of ***the Central Plains***. Originally, they were core members of the East Asian civilizational sphere, but now they were increasingly condemned as ***barbarians*** (蛮夷).

However, by the Western Zhou Dynasty (西周) at the latest, these groups—referred to as Rong (戎), Di (狄), and Yi (夷) by the newly formed **Zhuxia** (诸夏 / the various Xia states) world—still shared a highly consistent technology and culture with the **Zhuxia**. During the more than two centuries of the Western Zhou's existence, the Zhou royal house consistently maintained marital alliances with the Jiang (姜) surname; among the eleven Sons of Heaven, seven had queens bearing the Jiang surname. During the Spring and Autumn period (春秋时期), it remained entirely normal for ***feudal lords*** to marry Rong and Di women. For instance, the mother of Duke Wen of Jin (晋文公), the hegemon with the most illustrious achievements, belonged to the Rong and Di.

The historical reality is that right up until the Warring States period (战国时期), there were indeed far too many ethnic groups and states—such as certain Jiang-surnamed regimes—that possessed this "**Hua-Xia–Barbarian duality**" (华夏-夷狄二象性). Even recognized ***barbarian*** states could behave in ways entirely indistinguishable from the **Zhuxia** ***feudal lords***. For example, the State of Zhongshan (中山国) during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods: although other

feudal lords frequently despised it, they certainly did not exclude the King of Zhongshan when they needed to mutually acknowledge each other as kings.

When time entered the final millennium BC, supported by universal technological advancement, the **Zhuxia** entered a period of rapid expansion, and their peripheral neighbors were heavily impacted by this mutation. On the one hand, they were violently compressed by the ferocious expansionist momentum of ***the Central Plains*** feudal states; on the other hand, the emergence of new technologies made a transition to a more thorough nomadic mode of production possible. Consequently, these tribes, increasingly viewed as aliens by ***the Central Plains dynasties***, began to transform into nomadic peoples. Under the military pressure of ***the Central Plains*** people, they migrated northward, entering the newly formed mixed agro-pastoral zones and purely pastoral regions, bringing with them technology and culture that remained similar to those of ***the Central Plains***.

The Xiongnu Xiutu tribe (匈奴休屠部) was highly likely one such tribe long ago; they might have even held a lofty position within the early ***tribal confederacies*** (部族联盟) of China. During the transition of these ***tribal confederacies*** into an ***early state*** (早期国家), the Xiutu tribe still inhabited the mountainous regions in the northwest of Guanzhong (关中), maintaining their original sacrificial activities.

Because their dwelling place was exceptionally close to ***the Central Plains region*** (中原地区) *(Guanzhong is naturally included in* ***the Central Plains*** *in a broad sense)*, the Xiutu people must have been exceedingly familiar with the production technologies of ***the Central Plains***. Considering that technologies such as bronze smelting might have originated from the West, their exposure time to these techniques might have been even longer than that of ***the Central Plains*** tribes. The Xiutu tribe was, at the very least, exceptionally skilled in smelting copper, and on the eve of their northward migration, they should have already mastered relatively mature iron-smelting technology capable of manufacturing weapons.

This is not surprising at all. The Ganquan (甘泉) region is not far from the primary metal-producing areas of high-antiquity China *(e.g., Yuncheng [运城])*. From Tongchuan (铜川) northwards all the way to Baotou City (包头市) along the Yellow River, this entire region remains China's most paramount coal and metal production zone to this day, although its known excavation history is not recorded that early. They perhaps felt immense pride in their exquisite metalcrafting skills and utilized bronze human statues in their Heaven-worshipping rituals. In the final centuries prior to their northward migration, the Xiutu people might have been classified as a branch of the Quanrong (犬戎), and later, a branch of the Yiqu (义渠).

With the violent expansion of the State of Qin (秦国), the Xiutu people, along with countless other **barbarian tribes** (夷狄部落), were forcefully compelled to migrate north. Accompanying them on their northward journey were agricultural and handicraft technologies, political ideologies, and religious culture. By the Warring States period (战国时期), China, as a ***primary classical state*** (原生古典国家), had developed to a highly mature stage. These abundant civilizational achievements were infinitely precious to the steppe regions, which were dominated by the nomadic production mode (游牧生产方式). A formidable and sagacious leader would inevitably notice them and could not possibly resist the urge to exploit them.

Although it is exceedingly difficult to expect future archaeological discoveries to definitively prove this—after all, the Mongolian Plateau (蒙古高原) is far too vast, and the populace inhabiting it was far too dispersed—judging from the numerous Xiongnu (匈奴) walled settlements excavated thus far, the Xiongnu Chanyu (单于) highly likely controlled the production of critical materials by centralizing the settlement of metallurgical and handicraft artisans. He enhanced his political authority through the power of allocation *(which likely encompassed non-nomadic daily necessities)*.

For the Xiutu people, the absolute bedrock for establishing themselves in their new homeland lay precisely in their metal artifacts and crafting techniques. Perhaps when they arrived on the steppe, they brought the colossal bronze human statue with them. The appearance of such a gigantic, two-meter-tall divine statue gleaming with golden light upon the boundless wilderness delivered a colossal sensory shock to the people of that era. Under appropriate guidance, this divine statue was perceived as the physical manifestation of the Heavenly God (天神).

The technological supremacy of the Xiutu people shrouded the entire tribe in a mythological aura. If neighboring steppe tribes wished to obtain certain sacrificial implements, they would naturally incline toward commissioning the Xiutu people to manufacture them and paying remuneration. Consequently, this tribe came to be viewed as possessing the capability to communicate with Heaven, Earth, and spirits. The Xiutu King (休屠王) monopolized the pathway connecting the mortal realm to the deities, and thus gradually became known as the "Jinglu Spirit" (径路神), establishing a form of religious authority.

The metal artifacts manufactured by the Xiutu tribe became highly sought after across the steppe. The finest precious swords they produced were called "Jinglu swords" (径路刀) and were presented as supremely important treasures to the Xiongnu Chanyu. During the process in which two generations of Chanyus—Touman (头曼) and Modu (冒顿)—developed the original clans and

tribes into a state and unified the various northern tribes, the Xiutu tribe was identically integrated into the political structure centered around the Chanyu. From then on, they were regarded as a branch of the Xiongnu.

Because they mastered critical metalcrafting technology, the Xiutu people enjoyed an exceptionally vital position within the Xiongnu state apparatus. The worship of the giant Golden Man (金人) was aggressively weaponized by the Xiongnu Chanyu to consolidate his rule, but it remained under the custodianship of the Xiutu people. This is not surprising at all. Bronze artifacts naturally require periodic rust removal; entrusting a massive bronze artifact to people incapable of maintaining it would only result in it losing its luster.

We can vividly imagine that every May, when the Xiongnu held their grand sacrificial ceremonies at Longcheng (茏城), members of the Xiutu tribe would drive carriages to transport the Golden Man to Longcheng. This Golden Man likely played a paramount role in the Heaven-worshipping rituals. The specific rituals might have also inflicted damage upon the bronze artifact, such as smoke exposure *(note the records in the Hanwu Gushi [《汉武故事》])*—which further reinforced the absolute necessity for the Golden Man's original custodians to execute the maintenance.

During the reign of the Laoshang Chanyu (老上单于), the Xiongnu (匈奴) thoroughly defeated the Greater Yuezhi (大月氏), forcing them to migrate westward. The Hexi Corridor (河西走廊) was fundamentally brought under Xiongnu control, and the Xiutu people (休屠人) were arranged by the Chanyu to reside and graze near present-day Wuwei City (武威市), becoming one of the Xiongnu branches situated closest to the Han Dynasty (汉朝) border.

A greater probability is that, after their initial northward migration, the Xiutu tribe (休屠部) originally inhabited a relatively southern location compared to the Mongolian Plateau (蒙古高原), maintaining proximity to the Qin and Han empires (秦汉帝国). The Chanyu possessed no reason to forcefully relocate them further north; after all, different tribes had already adapted to specific climates over protracted periods.

Unfortunately, the good times did not last. After Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝) ascended the throne, the geopolitical trajectory of the Han-Xiongnu War violently reversed. Within a mere six months in 121 BC, Huo Qubing (霍去病) led the Han army (汉军) to smash through the Hexi Corridor twice. Tribes such as the Xiutu and Hunxie (浑邪) suffered catastrophic casualties, and the Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven (祭天金人) was captured by the Han.

Yizhixie (伊稚斜) was infuriated and humiliated, resolving to exact severe accountability upon the Hunxie King (浑邪王) and the Xiutu King (休屠王). We do not know precisely what transpired here. Perhaps the Chanyu initially only intended to execute the Hunxie King, but the Hunxie King exploited an information asymmetry to deceive the Xiutu King, making the latter believe he was equally in peril, thereby coercing the Xiutu tribe to surrender to the Han together. It is also possible that the Chanyu was indeed angry enough initially to want to kill both kings, but after issuing a certain order, he calmed down and regretted it. Since the Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven had already been seized, it would be exceedingly difficult to reacquire; to additionally lose a tribe that mastered core technologies in metal smelting and artifact manufacturing would only be disastrous for the Chanyu.

Regardless of the specifics, while the surrender was still in the planning phase, the Xiutu King realized he was not in danger of severe punishment from the Chanyu, and thus he regretted his decision. Under these circumstances, the Hunxie King had no alternative; unable to ascertain whether his surrender plot might be betrayed, he could only strike first, assassinating the Xiutu King and annexing his tribesmen.

However, during the rendezvous process with the detachment dispatched by Huo Qubing, the original members of the Xiutu tribe were unwilling to surrender to the Han and began to flee. This was perhaps because they learned they would not have been punished by the Xiongnu Chanyu anyway, and as technical artisans, they were exceptionally scarce and enjoyed elevated status within the Xiongnu regime. From Huo Qubing's perspective, regardless of the underlying reasons, the perilous threat of the situation spiraling out of control had already materialized, compelling him to deploy ruthless measures to halt such mass desertion.

Thus, this surrender was ultimately completed, albeit with immense friction. The wife and two sons of the Xiutu King were temporarily enslaved as official slaves (官奴). Emperor Wu of Han was likely highly intrigued by the Xiutu royal family from the very beginning. He paid specific attention to the adolescent Jin Midi (金日磾) and deliberately tested him.

Upon receiving the news, the Yizhixie Chanyu was undoubtedly apoplectic with rage. Following the conclusion of the freezing winter, he immediately and irrationally mobilized his forces to retaliate against the Han in the spring. This not only catastrophically disrupted the breeding and multiplying of Xiongnu livestock, but also meant that after an entire winter, the Han Dynasty had virtually zero surplus grain left to plunder.

The underlying reason for executing such an economically irrational military decision highly likely lay in the fact that this invasion was driven by profound political motives. The defection of the Hunxie and Xiutu tribes to the Han Dynasty was not merely a zero-sum shift in land and population; it signified the commencement of the **Xiongnu Empire**'s disintegration. This empire was inherently an amalgamation of hundreds or thousands of tribes with disparate languages and

bloodlines. Now, the grand illusion constructed during the reign of the Modu Chanyu (冒顿单于)—utilizing military supremacy and political-economic institutions to forge the perception that "all people who draw the bow are unified as one" (控弦之民皆一统)—was violently shattering.

Emperor Wu of Han, conversely, was overjoyed. He presumably scrutinized this colossal Golden Man (金人) for a long time, marveling at it. Perhaps this Golden Man was genuinely worshipped publicly at the Ganquan Palace (甘泉宫) for a period before ultimately being sequestered in the imperial treasury.

In that era, the Han people still retained considerable memories regarding deep antiquity. They believed that the Xiongnu, or at least the Xiongnu royal house, were indeed descendants of the Xia people (夏人). The location of the Ganquan Palace was an ancient sacrificial center for the **Hua-Xia people** (华夏族), and over an immense span of time, the Xiutu people had persistently inherited and perpetuated the sacrificial rituals *(which later centered around the Golden Man)* precisely at this location. This fact was likely no secret within the Han Dynasty, and Emperor Wu consistently weaponized this to augment national identity.

Jin Midi passed the emperor's trials. Emperor Wu concluded that he was genuinely capable of undertaking immense responsibilities, and thus bestowed upon him the surname Jin (金 / Gold), directly referencing the ancestral profession of the Xiutu people. The image of the Xiutu tribe was inevitably sanitized and elevated daily; the specific actions of the last Xiutu King himself were naturally intentionally obscured, while the "Xiutu Returning to the Han" (休屠归汉) was destined to become a romanticized historical saga, vastly overshadowing the later eastward return of the Torghut tribe (土尔扈特部东归). After all, in high antiquity, the Xiutu people might have genuinely been core members of the Yellow Emperor's (黄帝) ***tribal confederacy***.

Capitalizing on this momentum, the Han government constructed three shrines for the Xiutu tribe in Yunyang County (云阳县). One was dedicated to commemorating the history of the entire tribe, the second was dedicated to commemorating the Golden Man for Worshipping Heaven, and the third was dedicated to commemorating the tribal leader. Accordingly, they were named: the Xiutu Shrine, the Golden Man Shrine, and the Shrine of the Jinglu Spirit (径路神祠).

The locally resettled Xiutu populace gradually assimilated with the massive influx of Han Chinese commoners relocated from the interior. Their royal family, led by the two brothers Jin Midi and Jin Lun (金伦), thrived equally well within the Han Dynasty, remaining prominent nobles right through

to the Xin Mang period (新莽时期). Furthermore, they are still recognized today as the primary founding ancestors of the Jin surname.

Within the Xiongnu, the exquisite metal tools manufactured by the Xiutu people in the past continued to be utilized for a considerably long time. Among them, a precious sword even served as a witness to the Southern Xiongnu's (南匈奴) submission to the Han—a reality that one must concede possesses a profound sense of historical destiny.

Thus, through a crucial branch of the Xiongnu (匈奴), we can glimpse the underlying causes behind the rise of this empire.

Undoubtedly, the Xiongnu were a nation with phenomenally complex origins, whose identity was artificially forged. Among the Xiongnu, there were Mongoloids, Caucasoids, and the appearance of Indo-Europeans is not considered anomalous. To which language family the Xiongnu language belonged remains unknown to this day, because this language hybridized the tongues of countless tribes; simultaneously, it is entirely normal that it was influenced by several language branches or even distinct language families. One is also fundamentally unable to ascertain whether the Xiongnu rulers were definitively descendants of the Xiahou clan (夏后氏).

However, I maintain that what can be definitively established is that the Xiongnu state was clearly subjected to decisive influence from China during its formative process. Those members of the original **Hua-Xia people** (华夏族) who diverged into nomads during the final millennium BC constituted the very absolute backbone of this state. It was precisely the technology, institutions, culture, and faith they brought that allowed the **Xiongnu Empire** to become so anomalously civilized and formidable. In other words, even if the Chanyu's (单于) paternal bloodline did not originate from the Chinese interior, almost all the primary characteristics that distinguished the Xiongnu regime from other nomadic regimes in human history originated from what later became known as the ***Handi / China Proper*** (汉地).

This is exactly why the Xiongnu appeared to understand the Han Dynasty (汉朝) so profoundly, and were perpetually capable of rapidly learning from their southern adversary during warfare. Throughout the entire Han period, the northward flight of sedentary agrarian inhabitants into Xiongnu-controlled territory remained a persistent problem *(naturally, not just commoners, but aristocrats and dignitaries fled north identically)*. This was also identically one of the primary functions of the Great Wall (长城).

Therefore, we can articulate it this way: **The Xiongnu Empire itself was the product of the spillover of Hua-Xia civilization during its *Great Expansion* (大扩张) era; the Xiongnu Empire was the shadow of the Han Empire—its very own reflection.**

To modern observers, this might strongly resemble a form of elusive fatalism: a person might conquer any formidable enemy, but he can never annihilate his own shadow, unless the light itself ceases to exist.

Viewed historically, it was precisely the divergence, respective integration, and warfare between the nomadic groups and agrarian groups in northern China during the final millennium BC that forged their respective identities. The epoch-defining wars between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu ultimately determined which side's identity could be preserved more robustly. The Han Dynasty's victory allowed the identity of the massive ethnic group known as the "Han people" (汉人) to be unprecedentedly established. Furthermore, because of the termination of and reactionary backlash against ***feudalization***, this identity did not suffer massive disruption. The Xiongnu, as the defeated party, could no longer equate their own name with all the "people who draw the bow" (控弦之民) across northern China. For this to be realized again, it would have to wait over a millennium for Genghis Khan (成吉思汗) to accomplish it.

Naturally, we must not assume that the spillover of the East Asian ***Great Expansion*** process merely stagnated at the formative era of the **Xiongnu Empire**. As the Han Dynasty militarily defeated the Xiongnu, certain remnants of the original **Xiongnu Empire** likely migrated westward. Today, we can observe that during the centuries following the Western Han (西汉), numerous formidable nations whose names contained the phonetic sound *"Hun"* appeared across vast regions stretching from northern China all the way to the Danube River, and they fundamentally all projected a nomadic image.

Although scholars remain incapable of determining the specific relationships between these ethnic groups, it is highly probable that the wars between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu ultimately instigated the westward migration of numerous peoples across the ***Eurasian Steppe***, and many were influenced by the Xiongnu to varying degrees.

This monumental historical event likely exerted a massive impact on the developmental trajectory of humanity. For instance, we observe that the initial massive influx of ***barbarians*** (蛮族) into the territory of the Roman Empire was precisely because they were compelled to migrate under the violent pressure of the Huns (匈人). At that time, they were still far too primitive, and a considerable gap existed before their production level and degree of civilization could generate a fierce demand for ***feudalization***; therefore, the entry of these ***barbarians*** appeared "premature."

Simultaneously, the ***degree of feudalization*** within the Western Roman Empire itself was still limited. It was immensely difficult for the local manorial lords to mount a forceful resistance analogous to that of the Han Chinese landlords in northern China or the Persian landlords *(when facing the Turkic peoples)*. This proved extraordinarily conducive to the ***barbarians*** settling down and aggressively occupying the land, significantly reducing the probability of compromises *(where **barbarians** do not occupy land but are satisfied with becoming bureaucratic or military aristocrats)*. Perhaps this is one of the innumerable reasons why Europe was able to march toward success in the future.

Regarding the nomadic **production mode** (生产方式), only one final problem remains. In fact, it is not even a tangible problem, but rather a conjecture whose answer is fundamentally impossible to know.

We have now observed that the eastern extremity of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** was excessively close to the civilizational core of ***East Asia*** *(judging from excavated prehistoric sites, a massive proportion of China's primary civilization was already situated within the mixed agro-pastoral zone)*. Driven by climatic shifts, civilization here underwent a divergence. The grand steppe overlaps with a massive expanse of what is politically defined as northern China. Consequently, it was structurally impossible for the Chinese empire not to maintain exceptionally frequent interactions with its nomadic neighbors.

During the formation of the Chinese ***classical state*** (古典国家), this catalyzed the birth of a mirror empire in the north—namely, the **Xiongnu Empire**. However, subsequently, China's own historical trajectory derailed. It failed to enter the orbital path of ***feudalization***, and instead enabled the ***bureaucratic state to restore itself*** (官僚国家复辟).

This engenders a profound question: **Did the historical reality of China independently deviating toward a *restoration-bureaucratic system* exert a conspicuous impact on the historical trajectory of the entire world?**

Naturally, we are not conceptualizing the type of impact where, hypothetically, China evolved into the ***Late Middle Ages*** and unleashed expansionist campaigns across every global region akin to those executed by Europe in ***Our Timeline*** (本位面). Rather, we are considering this question under the premise that political and military contact across various global regions was strictly limited *(i.e., prior to China reaching the **early modern era**)*. Therefore, the impact of the mutation in China's historical trajectory upon the outside world would primarily have been transmitted through the nomadic groups inhabiting the ***Eurasian Steppe***.

On this point, my view is highly consistent with that of some Western scholars: a unified (even if not entirely unified) ***restoration-bureaucratic Chinese empire*** (复辟官僚制中华帝国) likely made

it easier for a unified nomadic regime (游牧政权) to form at the eastern end of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** (欧亚大草原).

However, I wish to emphasize certain other reasons. For instance, if China had normally entered a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) beginning in the fourth century, the formidable ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) in northern China would have possessed both the capability and the willingness to restrict the activities of nomadic tribes at the eastern end of the ***Eurasian Steppe*** and expand their influence into the steppe.

A feudal Chinese society would inevitably generate or introduce a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教). Following the expansion patterns of Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam in steppe regions, the entire Mongolian Plateau (蒙古高原) should have comprehensively converted to this religion by the 10th century AD (though perhaps not every herdsman, the chieftains would certainly have believed). Facing a feudal China, the various steppe tribes would have found it difficult to generate the internal momentum for unification. They would highly likely have participated in a more complex diplomatic environment in a relatively mild manner (rather than a tributary system [朝贡体系] with a unified Chinese empire at its absolute core), appearing in China as mercenaries and partially transforming into sedentary settlers due to land remuneration brought by military service.

I believe a realistic consequence is that when China embarked on the path of ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚复辟), it did not merely bring upon itself a "**dynastic cycle**" (王朝周期律); it simultaneously imposed a "**dynastic cycle**" belonging to nomadic peoples upon Mongolia. Since the Xiongnu (匈奴), regimes such as the Rouran (柔然), the Turkic Khaganate (突厥), and the Uyghur Khaganate (回鹘) fundamentally lacked the capacity to establish stable regimes across vast nomadic regions. Severe natural disasters and failed wars could both precipitate the fragmentation and collapse of a khanate.

Furthermore, due to the existence of a unified Chinese empire, although the regions along the Great Wall (长城) never recovered the massive military personnel numbers of the Western Han (西汉) period, remaining in a perpetual state of military alert was inevitable. Interactions between pastoralists and agrarians in ***East Asia*** were artificially obstructed by numerous barriers for political reasons. Consequently, it was indeed highly normal for nomadic peoples to migrate westward from Mongolia. Driven by formidable leaders filtered out through a highly intense political environment, and coupled with the fact that the Chinese empire genuinely possessed advantages in certain technologies since the Han Dynasty and maintained them until recent times , this would forge a destructive force.

Therefore, generally speaking, I contend that while the Chinese empire was committing direct suicide, it concurrently dragged Iran down with it, severely devastated the Islamic world and Eastern Europe, and interfered with India. However, these nations need not rush to condemn the foolish behavior of the Chinese empire, because they were, after all, sufficiently distant. China's immediate neighbors could only be rendered even more speechless, as the Chinese ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** (复辟官僚帝国) incidentally eradicated Yunnan (云南), and subsequently delivered a stab each to ***Korea*** (朝鲜) and Vietnam (越南). (Naturally, the Chinese empire was not always capable of interfering in these regions; frequently, it was the local rulers who actively sought the "true scriptures" [真经] for ruling their populaces).

I believe the most correct action Japan took in its history was to consistently and cautiously maintain its distance from the Chinese empire from the Heian period (平安时代) through the ***Chūsei (中世 / Middle Ages)***. Although this was initially done to maintain the independence of their **'Small Empire East of the Sea'** and the sacred power of the Emperor (天皇), one must now concede that this belongs to the category of "bad initial intentions that were ultimately executed well" (本意是坏的，最后被执行好了).

One cannot forget that nomadic peoples, due to their prolonged engagement in the nomadic production mode (游牧生产方式), inevitably generated an ideological and behavioral inertia. Even if nomadic peoples conquered agricultural regions, it was exceedingly difficult for them initially to choose to become landlords and engage in agricultural management, because they genuinely knew nothing about managing land. As conquerors, nomads required a period of adaptation to alter their living habits and consciousness, perhaps taking two or three generations.

Naturally, this does not imply that nomadic peoples had no way to undergo ***feudalization*** (封建化); Hungary and Bulgaria serve as examples of nomadic peoples successfully establishing feudal states (封建国家). However, in a region with an unstable political environment, the longer the time dragged on, the greater the risk became. If the nomadic peoples who arrived earlier delayed their ***feudalization***, how could they guarantee that no new conquerors would follow in their wake, and how could they guarantee that the remnant ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) would not counterattack?

For Western Europe and Japan, which achieved the greatest success in the modernization process, the peoples who "***Entered the Pass***" (入关) into the former during the ***feudalization*** period were not nomadic peoples, while the latter was dominated by the samurai class (武士阶级); neither had any relation to nomadic peoples. Viewed from this perspective, during the great Eurasian migrations of that era, the steppe nomads' oppression of peoples like the Goths at the western extremity,

compelling them to enter Roman territory, indeed held a certain significance. Compared to nomads, it was vastly easier for the Germanic peoples to embrace a sedentary life.

Although observing the history of ***Our Timeline*** (本位面) makes it very easy to reach the conclusion that, over the long term of history, the nomadic production mode likely exerted a greater obstructive effect on human civilization. Nevertheless, I shall still offer a word of defense for the nomads here: the reason nomadic regimes exhibited such exceptionally massive destructiveness in actual history is highly correlated with the restoration of the Chinese ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家).

26, The Principal Characteristics of the Feudalization Process, to Facilitate Observation

Up to this point, essentially all regions globally worthy of observation under the central theme of ***feudalization*** (封建化) have been considered by us. Therefore, for the purpose of controlling the length of this work, I will no longer conduct highly detailed macroscopic investigations into specific regions hereafter.

Some might notice that regarding the Scandinavia (斯堪的纳维亚) region—perhaps also including Scotland (苏格兰) in the northern part of the British Isles (不列颠岛) and the more distant Iceland (冰岛)—such a not-insignificant expanse of northern Europe was identically categorized by me into the historical process of participating in the great migrations *(or more accurately, the "**barbarian invasions**" [蛮族入侵])* during previous discussions. However, the ***barbarian*** invasions originating from this region were glaringly different from those in Western Europe (西欧), because empirically, Western Europe was the invaded party, while Northern Europe (北欧) was the active invader. Conversely, those peoples living in the regions attacked by the Vikings (维京人) during their absolute zenith never persistently and deeply invaded the Vikings' homeland.

One might ask: Given this, how did the ***feudalization*** process unfold in northern Europe?

I maintain that although the historical trajectory of northern Europe was relatively unique, considering its geographical location, it is not fundamentally surprising. For a period following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (西罗马帝国), the North Sea (北海) region did not advance to the ***early state*** (早期国家) stage; it remained in a condition defined by a multitude of tribal clans. By the time the Vikings commenced massive, widespread plundering, it was already the latter half of the ***Early Middle Ages*** (中世纪早期) *(specifically, the European **Middle Ages**)*; the universal ***feudalization*** of Northern Europe only commenced when Western Europe had already entered the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期).

Due to its geographical proximity to Western Europe and the exceptionally frequent violent and non-violent exchanges, advanced production technologies continuously disseminated into the Northern European region, resulting in an exceedingly rapid elevation of ***productive forces*** (生产力). Furthermore, Northern Europe belonged to the absolute periphery of the world at that time, constituting a negligible terminus within the global trade network *(from the **High Middle Ages** onwards, commercial trade here was no longer negligible)*. The topography was also excessively fractured, with the population overwhelmingly concentrated along the protracted, rugged coastlines. On the eve of conversion to Christianity (基督教), the social structure of the Northern European region remained relatively simple; at the very least, compared to the conditions preceding the genesis of other ***classical states*** (古典国家), it fundamentally lacked a rigorous, explicitly defined social hierarchy.

These factors were entirely detrimental to the formation of a ***classical state*** capable of maintaining stability over a specific period in Northern Europe. Therefore, a direct transition to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) was profoundly natural. As we previously pointed out when examining southern India, the dual decline of the monarch's ***despotic power*** (专制权力) and the state apparatus's ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) brought about by ***feudalization*** strictly applies to those regions that passed through a ***typical classical period***. For regions that circumvented a ***typical classical society*** (典型古典社会) and proceeded directly to ***fe 古典时期udalization***, even ***early feudal systems*** (早期封建制度) and ideologies are highly beneficial for augmenting both of the monarch's powers.

Consequently, it was an entirely rational decision aligned with their interests for the rulers of the Northern European region to welcome ***feudalization***. Just as one observes that the earliest cohort of Northern European kings who converted to Christianity were frequently canonized as saints post-mortem, the rulers and ***feudalism*** (封建主义) were genuinely moving towards each other in a mutual embrace. Chronologically, although the ***feudalization*** of Northern Europe occurred considerably later than that of Western Europe, if compared with Japan, it was roughly a concurrent historical phenomenon.

Compared to Eastern Europe (东欧), which commenced ***feudalization*** around substantially the same period, Northern Europe possessed a not-insignificant area, but its land available for agricultural reclamation was severely restricted. This precisely spared it from the existential peril of excessive **serfdom** (农奴制) development following the rise of the commercial and industrial economy in Western Europe, and the threat from nomadic peoples was even more non-existent. Considering further that Northern Europe was phenomenally receptive to the influence of advanced factors from Europe, both geographically and religiously, it is utterly unsurprising that it

now belongs to the ranks of developed regions. The fact that contemporary Nordic countries are not merely developed, but rank at the absolute forefront globally in the Human Development Index, is likely due to factors functioning since the ***modern era***; as I am unfamiliar with this, I will not elaborate further here.

Therefore, based on the preceding tens of thousands of words of discussion, it is fundamentally not difficult to discover that although human civilization possesses a rich and colorful plurality, the historical developmental trajectories across various global regions concurrently adhere to a universal underlying law.

Naturally, we must not forget that the "leapfrog development" (跨越式发展) of Northern Europe possessed considerable particularity.

First, there was fundamentally no geographical barrier isolating Northern Europe from Western Europe, a region already undergoing preliminary ***feudalization***; personnel and materials could directly engage in high-intensity exchanges. We can observe that around the year 1000 AD, historical records already document a substantial number of mercenaries from Northern Europe operating across the entirety of Europe. This definitively distinguished it from the circumstances of Sub-Saharan Africa (撒哈拉以南非洲). During the initial centuries of contact with the newly formed Islamic world (伊斯兰世界) to the north, the contact patterns of Sub-Saharan Africa were exceptionally indirect. Commercial trade was primarily transferred through nomads in the desert *(such as the Tuareg people [*图阿雷格人*])*, and the earliest geographical information consisted entirely of second-hand data. Even between 1000 and 1300 AD, direct travel between the two regions remained an endeavor considered only by a minority of merchants and explorers.

Second, at the precise historical juncture when Northern Europe and Western Europe made contact, Western Europe was traversing the ***Early Middle Ages***. The **feudal states** (封建国家) of this period were still in their formative stage; their organizational capacity remained relatively weak, projecting a comparatively introverted, defensive posture externally. During the ***Early Middle Ages***, it was the Northern Europeans, not the Western Europeans, who appeared as aggressors within the long river of history.

This, in turn, forms an exceptionally stark contrast with the Americas (美洲). When the Americas made contact with Europe, European nations had universally concluded their **feudal stage** and entered the phase of ***early modern society*** (近世国家). Not only was there an astronomical chasm in technology between the two sides, but the advanced party possessed a ferocious, overwhelming desire for conquest, fundamentally depriving the backward party of any opportunity to learn and develop. Analyzed from this perspective, Northern Europe was undeniably and exceptionally fortunate.

The so-called economic ***feudalization*** (封建化) is fundamentally a state where the growth of the level of ***productive forces*** (生产力水平) propels society into a condition in which small-scale production *(household production)* and the ***natural economy*** (自然经济) secure a decisive advantage in efficiency, and the tenancy system becomes the most effective mode of exploitation at the time.

*(Naturally, this assertion that "the **natural economy** held an advantage in efficiency" is not entirely precise. No matter how advanced a **classical empire** might be, it could never compare to post-early modern regimes. Although the **commodity economy** within a **classical empire** was developed, the **natural economy** likely still constituted the majority. It is simply that when **feudalization** commenced, the substantial **commodity economy** of **classical society** suffered severe regression).*

Beyond the primary factor of ***productive forces***, we have previously identified several factors that influenced the emergence of this morphology. For instance, excessively vibrant commercial trade undeniably obstructs the ***natural economy*** from securing a dominant position.

Economic ***feudalization*** naturally catalyses a trend toward political ***feudalization***, but this is not invariably realized. This is the single most critical historical reality I wish to elucidate through these four hundred thousand words: a bureaucratic system (官僚体制) that fails to disintegrate normally will identically suffocate the genesis of a feudal system (封建体制).

The definitive marker of the completion of political ***feudalization*** is the formation of the ***feudal political system*** (封建政治体制) represented by England and France during the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期) in Western Europe (西欧). Naturally, we recognize that globally, only Western Europe and Japan reached this precise stage. Other regions, provided they were not excessively backward, invariably exhibited tendencies toward ***feudalization*** during diverse historical periods, yet due to myriad reasons, they failed to incubate a feudal system analogous to that of Europe.

However, the volume of historical documents preserved across various global regions fluctuates significantly, as does their reliability. Frequently, it is not particularly easy for scholars to definitively determine the predominant ***production mode*** (生产方式) or how exploitation was executed in a specific region at a specific historical moment. Therefore, when observing the history of various regions during their ***feudal period*** (封建时期), scholars habitually rely upon certain macroscopic characteristics that ***feudalization*** imposes upon the entire society.

Yet, as previously demonstrated, many of the so-called characteristics of ***feudalization*** actually reflect the morphological transformations that occur as a society transitions from a relatively ***typical***

classical society toward a ***feudal society*** (封建社会). However, a region prior to ***feudalization*** was not necessarily a ***typical classical society***—such as Scandinavia (斯堪的纳维亚) and Southern India (南印度). Therefore, observers must absolutely avoid the fallacy of rigidly applying criteria without regarding evolving circumstances (刻舟求剑). Scandinavia and Southern India never experienced any urban decline or a reduction in ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) and ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) during their ***feudalization*** processes. Could one legitimately claim they did not undergo ***feudalization***?

The first universally recognized and most easily observable phenomenon is urban decline. This occurred because the development of the ***natural economy*** caused the commercial circulation necessary to sustain urban existence to recede. The atrophy of urban life was universally observed during the terminal phase of the ***classical era*** and the ***early feudal era***, most conspicuously in Rome (罗马)—whether within the borders of the Western or Eastern Empire—a phenomenon European scholars have long comprehended thoroughly.

Urban decline identically materialized in Japan (日本), but its manifestation was exceptionally peculiar. This was due to Japan prematurely introducing China's bureaucratic system, and specifically, the bureaucratic system of the restoration period. The "urban decline" in Japan during the late Heian period (平安后期) primarily manifested as the decay of the settlements formed under the mandates of the Ritsuryo system (律令制) and the terminal nodes of local administration—namely, the *Gunke* (郡衙 / county offices; here, the so-called "county" [郡] refers to the administrative unit subordinate to the province [令治国] under the Japanese Ritsuryo system). I happened to discover this entirely by chance while reading the eighth chapter, *The Transformation of Regional Society* (《地域社会的转变》), of the Kodansha Japanese History series, *The Transformation of the Ritsuryo State: From the Nara Period to the Early Heian Period* (《律令国家的转变：奈良时代到平安时代前期》).

Clearly, the so-called urban decline in Japan differed astronomically from that in Europe. In Japan, political factors were exceptionally pronounced because the Ritsuryo system was *de facto* abandoned during the Heian period. The decline of local settlements during the Heian period even preceded the Insei (院政 / Cloistered Rule) era. Conversely, during the early Kamakura period (镰仓时代前期) following the conclusion of the Insei, the Japanese archipelago experienced no conspicuous urban decline. In reality, this specific period was the genuine ***early feudal era*** subsequent to the conclusion of the ***classical era***. Although the Japanese—especially the Japanese

of that era—might not necessarily perceive it this way, the historical reality is that Japan's ***feudalization*** process was remarkably moderate. Although the samurai (武士) class did not lack instances of rebelling against the imperial court, exiling the Emperor (天皇), and establishing alternative central authorities, in the final analysis, they organized a feudal regime squarely within the framework of the Japanese state.

In China, urban life also underwent a transformation since the late Eastern Han Dynasty (东汉后期). However, due to China's colossal scale, it is fundamentally impossible to generalize. In Northern China (北中国), from the end of the Han Dynasty to the Sixteen Kingdoms period (十六国时期), urban life generally regressed. It is merely that the urban decline during the terminal phase of the Chinese ***classical era*** was monumentally impacted by warfare. The proportion of population and societal wealth annihilated by the warlord chaos since the end of the Han Dynasty was something the Mediterranean world could not possibly compare with.

However, in Southern China (中国南方), because the history of development here was inherently shorter, a massive influx of population had already migrated from the north during the peaceful eras of the Han Dynasty, and the chaos of war further accelerated this demographic migration. Because the original urban life in the south during the ***classical era*** was already at a relatively low baseline, cities in the south actually continued to develop under the rule of the Eastern Wu (东吴) and the Jin Dynasty (晋朝).

The situation in India was similar to China's; its sheer mass precludes sweeping generalizations. Following the collapse of the Gupta Empire (笈多王朝), Northern India (北印度) might project an impression of urban life in decline, but this was impossible in Southern India. This was because Southern India not only never experienced a ***typical classical period***, but under the stimulus of maritime trade, its cities actually became more prosperous.

However, in the Islamic world, the urban decline brought by ***feudalization*** was not sufficiently evident, because the entire Islamic world was in a state of excessive openness and commercial prosperity. Although some large cities were no longer what they used to be due to regime changes, the Islamic world overall did not experience the universal urban decay seen in *Europe* during the ***Late Antiquity***.

Therefore, we can observe that the characteristic of urban decline associated with ***feudalization*** explicitly exhibits multiple disparate manifestations. In regions where classical cities were highly developed and the ***natural economy*** (自然经济) subsequently expanded rapidly, urban decline was phenomenally conspicuous. In regions where international trade remained perpetually developed, and where the ***classical period*** was less concentrated (chronologically) and less typical than those of

the Han and Rome, perhaps some cities declined while new ones simultaneously arose, resulting in no overall regression. Conversely, when a ***feudal economic system*** (封建经济制度) was established in originally hyper-backward regions, urban development progressed continuously without interruption.

The second profoundly conspicuous mutation is the displacement of the **"*lingua franca*"** (四方通语) by ***vernacular languages*** (民族语言).

Here, the notion of a "***lingua franca***" during the ***classical period*** is not necessarily absolutely precise; on occasion, it did not manifest as a spoken language, but rather as a universally utilized script. However, unlike urban decline, the decay of the ***classical lingua franca*** (古典通语) was not completed at the very inception of ***feudalization*** (封建化). Based on observations of Europe, Ethiopia, and India, the ***classical lingua franca*** would continue to be extensively utilized as a religious language for a prolonged period following the commencement of ***feudalization***.

The most quintessential paradigm occurred in the West. Latin (拉丁语), as the official language and ***lingua franca*** of the Roman Empire, was ultimately displaced by the ***vernacular languages*** of various nations in tandem with the progression of ***feudalization***, despite the Catholic Church's persistent adherence to it during the ***Middle Ages***. In Ethiopia, subsequent to the collapse of the Kingdom of Aksum (阿克苏姆王国), Ge'ez (吉兹语) remained in use for an extended period as the official language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, yet ***vernacular languages*** represented by Amharic (阿姆哈拉语) surged following the ***feudalization*** of Ethiopia. Today, the positioning of Ge'ez in Ethiopia aligns fundamentally with that of Latin in Western Europe: both are ancient languages utilized exclusively in religious contexts, and realistically, even within religious activities, this language is likely scarcely employed.

In India, the trajectory of Sanskrit (梵语) differed marginally, as it functioned primarily as a religious language from its inception; however, during the ***classical era***, it likely functioned to some extent as a spoken language. Yet, alongside the asynchronously paced ***feudalization*** across the entirety of India, Sanskrit completely ceased to serve as a spoken tongue, calcifying into a written language deployed in realms such as academia and religion. Simultaneously, diverse regional vernaculars gradually evolved, metamorphosing into the vital instruments for quotidian communication among the populace. By the time European influence arrived in India, Sanskrit had already suffered severe degradation.

Even in regions where ***feudalization*** transpired but was less conspicuous, the displacement of the ***lingua franca*** by ***vernacular languages*** occurred to varying degrees. Today, the Iranian language family (伊朗语系) is delineated from west to east into Kurdish, Persian, Pashto, and so forth; the

modern branches of the Turkic language family (突厥语系) identically function as the official languages of several Central Asian states, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. However, truthfully, because the history of ***the Middle East*** and ***Central Asia*** is phenomenally chaotic, rendering the establishment of stable **feudal states** (封建政权) fundamentally impossible, and compounded by the fact that Middle Persian and Middle Turkic were insufficiently typical as ***classical lingua francas***, the Iranian and Turkic languages offer only limited reference value.

The circumstances in ***Southeast Asia*** are identical: neither Pali nor Khmer is utilized any longer to spell out ***vernacular languages***. Japan's circumstances were relatively peculiar. After all, Japan, as an individual nation or civilization, possesses a relatively modest territorial expanse. It was exceedingly difficult for a classical language to be utterly displaced in quotidian usage by a multitude of regional folk dialects, as occurred with the aforementioned Latin and Sanskrit. Nevertheless, the characteristic that ought to manifest indeed materialized. For instance, during the ***Chūsei*** (中世 / ***Middle Ages***), the linguistic disparity between the Emperor (天皇) and the court nobility (公卿) versus the language utilized by the samurai (武士) and commoners became starkly pronounced. The former conspicuously preserved more characteristics of classical Japanese—a linguistic divergence that remains perceptible even in Emperor Hirohito's (裕仁天皇) radio broadcast announcing Japan's surrender.

Conversely, in regions devoid of thorough ***feudalization***, the ***classical lingua franca*** was not so easily supplanted by ***vernacular languages***. For example, from Mauritania to present-day Iraq, the official language of an unbroken contiguity of nations remains Arabic, which tangentially reflects the insufficiency of ***feudalization*** within the Arab world.

The most quintessential paradigm remains China. China's ***classical lingua franca*** practically never vanished *(or more accurately, though it never vanished, it was perpetually evolving)*. Classical Chinese (文言文) merely increasingly degenerated into a specialized format strictly deployed for drafting official documents. Yet even so, one can observe that the dialects most radically divergent from contemporary Mandarin and possessing the lengthiest divergence period within China—such as Hokkien (闽南语) and Hakka (客家语)—are distributed precisely in regions with a relatively high ***degree of feudalization***, as vividly demonstrated by the Tulou (土楼) architecture in Fujian. Fundamentally, the myriad languages that can currently be categorized within the Sinitic family *(though within China, generally no one would invite trouble by explicitly stating this)* are geographically distributed in regions of China where the ***degree of feudalization*** is relatively high. Naturally, in a locale entirely suppressed by the bureaucracy like China, one must employ a significantly lower metric: the mere presence of robust clan power is already sufficient to be deemed a relatively high ***degree of feudalization***.

If we extend our gaze chronologically from earlier regions forward, Vietnam and ***Korea***—having separated from China—identically ultimately developed their indigenous national scripts. Interestingly, however, the history of Vietnam furnishes a tragically farcical case study, intuitively exposing to the world exactly how proponents of ***restoration-bureaucratic rule*** perceive ***vernacular languages*** (and scripts), even their own.

Emperor Minh Mạng (明命帝阮福皎), the second emperor of Vietnam's Nguyễn Dynasty (阮朝), was a fanatical champion of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). Although the era he inhabited undeniably belonged to the ***early modern period*** of the world, this individual authentically governed by taking the Qing Dynasty (清朝) as his paramount exemplar. Minh Mạng aggressively championed the Chinese language and Chinese literature, mandating that schools, governmental documents, and the civil service examinations unconditionally utilize Chinese characters (汉字), explicitly prohibiting the usage or intermingling of Chữ Nôm (喃字 / Vietnamese demotic script). During his attempt to conquer Cambodia, Emperor Minh Mạng identically enforced draconian assimilation policies, which included compelling Cambodians to adopt Chinese surnames, write in Chinese characters, and replacing indigenous toponyms with Chinese character names.

In stark antithesis to his veneration of Chinese characters and language, Minh Mạng violently suppressed Vietnam's national script, Chữ Nôm. Literary works composed in Chữ Nôm frequently exposed societal darkness, so it was fundamentally unsurprising that the bureaucratic rulers perceived it as inherently dangerous. Emperor Minh Mạng spent his entire life learning from the Chinese restoration empire and died in early 1841. In a certain sense, he undeniably succeeded: Vietnam's territorial expanse reached its absolute zenith during his reign, much like the Qing Dynasty also constituted the dynasty with the largest *de facto* controlled territory in Chinese history.

Yet, a mere year and a half after his demise, China was utterly crushed by Britain in the First Opium War (鸦片战争) and coerced into signing the Treaty of Nanking (《南京条约》). The colossal tide of human development is irrevocable. Yet Emperor Minh Mạng, even after centuries or millennia have passed, will likely secure a prominent position among the renowned "anachronistic reactionaries" (不识时务者) of all times and nations across the globe, purely due to his preposterously bizarre historical performance.

Beyond the two particularly conspicuous characteristics cited above, the ***feudalization*** **process** (封建化过程) brought about numerous other manifest changes to society, making it truly unnecessary to waste space enumerating them one by one.

One merely needs to perpetually remember that the societal impacts brought about during the **early stage of *feudalization*** (封建化早期) intuitively often belonged to the "negative" category, such as the further decline of female status *(driven by the necessity to construct stable patriarchal families)* and the collapse of social service institutions. However, this was absolutely not a genuine historical regression, nor did it signify that society had entered a Dark Age (黑暗时代) following its classical splendor. For regions that had already attained the **classical stage** (古典阶段), the disintegration and subsequent reorganization of society during the ***feudalization*** process was phenomenally necessary; failing to complete this would constitute a genuinely boundless Dark Age. Such a counter-intuitive conclusion has deceived countless scholars over the past millennium; those who are already aware should constantly remind themselves not to repeat this exact mistake.

Furthermore, the outward manifestations of ***feudalization*** naturally did not appear exclusively during ***early feudal society***; distinct characteristics emerged across different periods of ***feudal society*** (封建社会).

For instance, a highly renowned example is—the reason I say it is highly renowned is that even though China never experienced the period of ***late feudal society*** (封建社会晚期), this example enjoys considerable prominence even in China—the so-called "martial techniques" (武技) of the ***Late feudal era*** and the dawn of the ***early modern period*** (近世早期), which was a form of martial arts where two combatants engaged each other holding weapons. During Japan's Sengoku period (日本战国时期) and the early Edo period (江户前期), these martial techniques generally manifested as various schools of swordsmanship (刀法流派) utilizing the katana, though martial arts utilizing other weapons also existed. In Europe, during the ***Late Middle Ages*** (中世纪晚期), the Renaissance (文艺复兴时期), and the ***early modern period***, it is said that the German and Italian schools of swordsmanship were the most famous.

Initially, the primary weapon for combat was the two-handed sword, but this later mutated due to the demand for visual spectacle. Whether in Europe or Japan, that era witnessed the emergence of a vast cohort of martial arts masters who established their own sects, and a considerable number of enthusiasts continue to follow them today. **Feudal states** (封建国家) outside of Europe and Japan did not possess such massive cultural influence, making it difficult for me to learn about them from within China; however, it is said that such martial techniques indeed also existed in Thailand and Myanmar.

Why, then, did such systematic, sect-forming combat skills, which were widely sought after at the time, emerge during the terminal phase of the ***Middle Ages***?

The fundamental reason lies in the fact that when society developed to this specific stage, ***feudalism*** (封建主义) had already begun to march toward decline. **Feudal samurai** (封建武士) or **knights** (骑士), serving as the former military pillars, were now experiencing a decline in their functional utility in warfare; various regimes substantially elevated their capacity to administer and integrate their territories, and commoners began to play an increasingly paramount role in war. However, the socio-political status of the samurai and knights was supported precisely by their military service; consequently, these societal mutations inevitably induced a profound sense of crisis.

This is exactly why martial techniques became broadly popularized toward the terminal phase of the ***Middle Ages***: the pre-existing **lower-middle feudal ruling class** (中下层封建统治阶级) possessed an acute necessity to emphasize their martial superiority to prove the stability of their status. In earlier periods, this point fundamentally did not require any proof. By the even later era, let alone participating in martial arts duels, even merely spectating them became a symbol of class identity.

For societies that never experienced a **complete *feudalization* process** (完整封建进程), it was naturally fundamentally impossible for such phenomena to exist, because there was simply no **warrior stratum** (武士阶层) experiencing anxiety over its own social status. Expecting a state like China to develop martial techniques utilizing weaponry is sheer wishful thinking, because the warrior subjects responsible for the flourishing of such techniques had been the very targets the imperial court detested most and strove to eradicate for over a millennium.

Even the development of martial arts utilizing fewer implements was massively obstructed. Although Chinese people today frequently boast about the ancient heritage of their nation's martial arts, even a fool can discern that the vast majority of Chinese martial arts only emerged during the **late Qing period** (晚清时期)—a time when the Qing government's capacity to violently suppress the grassroots had undeniably declined. Under normal circumstances, the martial arts philosophies and sects that germinated during the chaotic times of a late dynasty were fundamentally unlikely to survive the next pacified prosperous era of "clear rivers and calm seas" (“河清海晏”的盛世).

Aside from some relatively obvious characteristics, the multitude of cultural and artistic achievements catalyzed by the ***feudalization*** process—such as epic poems (长篇叙事诗) and *monogatari* (物语) extolling the martial exploits of feudal knights—will no longer be enumerated one by one. After all, China never completed this historical trajectory, and therefore it is exceedingly difficult for me personally to achieve a profound understanding of them.

27, Utilizing Buddhism as a Paradigm to Illustrate the Transformation of Social Thought During the Feudalization Process

Previously, the impact of ***feudalization*** (封建化) upon ***social consciousness*** and its influence on the dissemination of religions have been explicated in a dispersed manner. Here, taking the historical regions where Buddhism (佛教) propagated as our scope of observation, we will centrally elucidate this point through the history of Buddhism itself and its competition with other religions.

The geographical expanse where Buddhism historically flourished encompasses ***South Asia*** (南亚), ***East Asia*** (东亚), ***Southeast Asia*** (东南亚), and portions of ***Central Asia*** (中亚). This macro-region still houses half of the global population today, and it commanded an even more staggering proportion in antiquity. Therefore, utilizing Buddhism as the primary narrative thread to investigate the evolution of feudal thought is highly representative.

Like Jainism (耆那教), Buddhism was birthed during the terminal phase of the ***Great Expansion*** (大扩张时代) era, which simultaneously constituted the formative period of the ***classical period*** (古典时代). Although the ***religious doctrines*** (教义) of these two religions undeniably possess the intense personal characteristics of their founders and prominent disciples, the prevalence of Buddhism and Jainism was definitively the product of their congruence with the demands of societal development.

Examples include their fierce opposition to the rigid caste system (种姓制度) of Brahmanism (婆罗门教), their critique of hyper-complex and astronomically costly sacrifices, their profound emphasis on the efficacy of individual effort *(achieving liberation [解脱] through ascetic cultivation, representing, of course, conditional free will)*, the ideology of non-violence, their adaptation to commercial ethics *(advocating honesty and frugality)*, and the capacity of the monastic order (僧团) to provide tangible assistance to commercial ***communities***.

These novel religious concepts mirrored the profound mutations in ***social consciousness*** since the ***Great Expansion*** and were monumentally conducive to the construction of a ***classical society*** (古典社会); consequently, they were universally embraced across multiple social strata. Naturally, they also garnered the immense favor of the rulers. After all, during the formative process of ***classical empires*** (古典帝国), newly ascendant monarchs were definitively not going to harbor amicable attitudes toward Brahmin priests (婆罗门祭司). Not only were these monarchs themselves highly

likely to originate from lower-caste groups, but to aggressively augment their ***despotic power*** (专制权力), it was fundamentally necessary to weaponize novel religions that critiqued the caste system.

This point is utterly decisive because Brahmanism or Hinduism (印度教) could entirely mutate into forms conducive to deifying autocratic monarchs; for instance, one clearly observes this exact adaptation within the Khmer Empire (高棉帝国). However, regardless of adaptations, Brahmanism and Hinduism ultimately struggle to repudiate the caste concepts deeply embedded within their own doctrines, nor can they negate the fundamental role of Brahmin priests. For monarchs attempting to maximize their ***despotic power***, this was ultimately less politically convenient than Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教).

During the formative period of classical India (古典印度), the rulers of the various Indian states manifested intense interest in and support for the Śramaṇa (沙门思潮) ideological currents opposing Brahmanism. The capability of Buddhism to distinguish itself among the multitude of Śramaṇa currents was inextricably linked to specific doctrines and ***religious laws*** (教法) inherent to Buddhism itself. For instance, the practices of accepting alms and maintaining celibacy clearly signaled to rulers that the Sangha (僧伽团体) was a relatively easily controllable religious group.

Naturally, when Shakyamuni (释迦牟尼) propagated the profound wisdom he had awakened to, it is highly probable that his objective was not the genesis of a formal religious organization. Early Buddhism resembled a philosophical school far more closely, much like the various philosophical sects of ancient Greece. Therefore, although this ideology—predicated upon personal epiphany—inevitably possessed cognitive elements aligning with societal development *(precisely because Shakyamuni himself was born in that specific era)*, it was ultimately not a religious ideology specifically engineered to support a ***classical society***.

However, the foundational ideological concepts and the organization of the monastic order established during Shakyamuni's era destined Buddhism to metamorphose into a formal religion. After all, it had already laid a robust foundation and secured a definitive foothold within society. Following the passing of Shakyamuni, Buddhism rapidly fractured into myriad sects. Concurrently, through the relentless filtering process of social reality, a specific Buddhist sect calling itself "Mahayana Buddhism" surged to prominence within classical India.

Today, Chinese Buddhism remains predominantly Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism refers to the Buddhist sects opposing it as "Hinayana Buddhism" (小乘佛教), which is patently a pejorative designation. Adherents of Hinayana Buddhism generally consider themselves to belong

to "Theravada Buddhism" (上座部佛教); in China, because the regions where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent are situated in the south, it is colloquially referred to as Southern Buddhism (南传佛教).

Buddhist sects differ in no substantive way from the sects of any other religion: every faction frantically attempts to proclaim that it alone represents the authentic, genuine Dharma (佛法) existing since the era of Shakyamuni. The specific historical reality is exceedingly difficult to ascertain today. Interestingly, however, due to the disparate historical developmental trajectories of ***East Asia*** and ***Southeast Asia***, we can clearly discern from the doctrines and ***religious laws*** of the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism existing today that the core distinction between these two ideologies does not lie in the magnitude of their philosophical divergence. Rather, it lies in the fact that they adapted to entirely different stages of social reality:

Mahayana Buddhism was the state religion of *classical society*, whereas Theravada Buddhism is the *feudal religion* (封建宗教) of *feudal society* (封建社会).

Next, let us examine where the exact differences between these two forms of Buddhism lie. In fact, merely enumerating their core distinctions renders the reality immediately self-evident.

- Theravada Buddhism pursues the Arhat (阿罗汉) as its ultimate goal of cultivation, relentlessly seeking individual Nirvana (涅槃); Mahayana Buddhism pursues the Bodhisattva (菩萨) as its ultimate goal, seeking to enable all sentient beings to attain Nirvana.

- Theravada Buddhism profoundly emphasizes the aspect of the Buddha primarily as a teacher/guide; Mahayana Buddhism fiercely emphasizes the absolute divinity of the Buddha.

- Theravada Buddhism emphasizes that through one's own strenuous effort, adhering strictly to the Buddha's teachings in cultivation leads to the attainment of the Arhat; Mahayana Buddhism intensely emphasizes altruism (利他)—one must not only attain liberation for oneself but must also assist all sentient beings in achieving liberation.

- The rituals of Theravada Buddhism are relatively spartan, emphasizing solitary cultivation and profound reverence for the Buddha; the rituals of Mahayana Buddhism are exceptionally labyrinthine, encompassing sutra chanting, elaborate offerings, and grand Dharma assemblies (法会).

- Theravada Buddhism heavily emphasizes the cultivation and liberation of monastics (出家人), and the monastic order is rigorously organized and deeply entrenched among the common populace; Mahayana Buddhism postulates that lay practitioners (居家信徒) can identically cultivate to elevated realms, rendering the monastic order relatively less rigorous and its connection with the grassroots populace comparatively superficial.

- In scriptural exegesis (释经), Theravada Buddhism strongly inclines toward literal interpretation; conversely, Mahayana Buddhism exhibits phenomenal flexibility in interpreting scriptures.

- Theravada Buddhism fundamentally dislikes expedient means (方便法门) in cultivation, fiercely emphasizing strict adherence to the precepts (戒律); whereas Mahayana Buddhism explicitly permits the utilization of diverse expedient means to guide sentient beings of varying fundamental capacities toward cultivation.

In fact, through such an enumeration, readers who have reached this point will naturally understand why Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教) is deemed a religion of the ***classical period***, whereas Theravada Buddhism (上座部佛教) is considered a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教).

However, for people outside of so-called communist countries—especially those in developed democratic nations like Europe, America, and Japan—it is exceedingly difficult to comprehend the ingenuity behind the concept of the Bodhisattva (菩萨) "saving all sentient beings" (“普度众生”) in Mahayana Buddhism. Those who do not understand the underlying rationale easily assume this is a sublime moral quality, representing an intense spirit of self-sacrifice. Yet I wish to state that the so-called universal salvation of sentient beings by Bodhisattvas is, in every sense, of the exact same nature as 20th-century dictators emphasizing that their exceptional leadership could save the nation.

When Mahayana Buddhist theory validates that an individual can cultivate to become a Bodhisattva to save all sentient beings, it simultaneously cannot deny that this person's physical morphology in reality bears no difference from that of ordinary humans. However, once we regard him as a highly virtuous "Bodhisattva" and postulate that a minuscule minority possesses the superhuman capability to help the vast majority achieve liberation (解脱), we *de facto* acknowledge a colossal asymmetry among individuals.

This is precisely the implicit meaning of the phrase "I can liberate you." This not only expresses that "I" possess a moral superiority, but additionally implies that "I" occupy a dominant position in terms of power. In reality, if one comprehends the actions of despotic monarchs in ***East Asia*** who

devoutly believed in or weaponized Buddhism, one would absolutely not overlook this point. These rulers frequently participated in religious activities precisely in the identity of a "Bodhisattva."

Right up to China's final imperial regime, namely the Qing Dynasty (清朝), the emperor, when facing regions deeply devoted to Tibetan Buddhism (藏传佛教) such as Tibet (藏地) and Mongolia (蒙古), was still regarded as the incarnation of Bodhisattva Manjushri (文殊菩萨). We have every reason to conclude that it was precisely this ideology—endowing the despotic monarch with divinity and ruling legitimacy—that constituted the foundation for Mahayana Buddhism's broad support *(from rulers)* within ***classical society*** (古典社会).

Therefore, from the 1st to the 7th century AD, Mahayana Buddhism catapulted to become the mainstream of Buddhism. This was exactly the golden age of ***classical society*** in the ***South Asia*** (南亚) region. The first entity to play a monumental role in propelling the development of Mahayana Buddhism was the Kushan Empire (贵霜帝国), a ***classical empire*** reliant on international trade; Buddhism's inherent support for commerce and urban civilization was already exceptionally robust. Moreover, the Mahayana Buddhist concept of Bodhisattvas saving all sentient beings was simply too irresistible for rulers seeking to elevate their personal image and authority. It is no wonder that the formidable sovereign Kanishka I (迦腻色伽一世) is revered by Buddhism as one of its most paramount monarchs.

The Kushan Empire's greatest contribution to Mahayana Buddhism lay in sculptural art *(stating it this way seems somewhat peculiar, as Mahayana Buddhism itself was highly likely formed precisely under the patronage of the Kushan Empire)*. Both the rulers and the Buddhas, now regarded as divine deities, could project their supreme majesty through colossal statues. During the reign of the Gupta Dynasty (笈多王朝), the rulers supported the construction and continuously sponsored the Nalanda Monastery (那烂陀寺), which later became a massive academic center for Mahayana Buddhism. During this period, Mahayana Buddhism developed phenomenally complex philosophy, the speculativeness of which is sufficient to leave the world marveling even today. When Master Xuanzang (玄奘法师) traveled west to this location, what he hoped to learn was precisely this outstanding ideology.

One must not forget that the ***classical period***, as a segment of the human historical process, inevitably engendered ideologies reflecting its temporal characteristics that possessed profound complexity. Likewise, Mahayana Buddhism could not possibly have been merely an ideology exclusively fronting for monarchical despotism; it possessed numerous commendable attributes.

Beginning in the 6th century AD, ***classical society*** in Northern India (北印度) commenced its regression. Logically speaking, Mahayana Buddhism was losing the foundation for survival in its birthplace at this time. Dramatically, however, although the ***feudalization*** process in Northern India had already begun to flourish, the Bengal region (孟加拉地区) did not follow suit. Today, the entire Bengal region *(encompassing Bangladesh [孟加拉国] and West Bengal [西孟加拉邦])* houses over 250 million people, but geographically, this is ultimately the northeastern corner of the Indian subcontinent (印度次大陆). Its development occurred relatively late, particularly in the present-day territory of Bangladesh, which was densely covered in swamps and crisscrossed by rivers.

This chronological lag can be earliest observed through the timing of the appearance of Northern Indian pottery cultures across various locales. In a word, the historical trajectory of Bengali society was later than that of the vast majority of the Ganges River (恒河流域) basin right from its starting phase. Just as ***classical society*** in Northern India marched toward decline, the Pala Empire (波罗王朝), rising in the Bengal region, was precisely entering ***the zenith of a classical empire***.

The agricultural conditions of Bengal itself were by no means poor, and ***early feudal regimes*** held no advantage relative to ***classical empires***. Thus, the Pala Empire was able to expand into a massive empire, specifically conquering the epicenter of Buddhism, the former Kingdom of Magadha (摩羯陀国). The Pala Empire naturally continued to support Mahayana Buddhism, a state religion already highly adapted to the ***classical period***. However, the overarching ***feudalization*** process of India was fundamentally unstoppable. Therefore, during the reign of the Pala Empire, Mahayana Buddhism underwent a critical mutation: Tantricization (密宗化).

We mentioned previously that during the regressive phase of a ***classical society*** (古典社会), rulers frequently exhaust every conceivable method to augment their ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) to compensate for the inevitable loss of ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力); therefore, seeking mysticism as a means to deify themselves is phenomenally normal.

From the perspective of the rulers' demands, this is indeed one reason why Tantrism (密宗) began to occupy the mainstream of Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教). After all, colossal monasteries required state patronage, and the demands of the patron would inevitably exert a guiding influence. Furthermore, when its own doctrines and ***religious laws*** became increasingly incongruent with the demands of temporal development, one of the few forces a religion could place its hopes upon was precisely the monarch intent on weaponizing it; this mutual clinging for survival aligned squarely with the interests of both parties at that time.

However, even from the intrinsic perspective of Mahayana Buddhism itself, Tantricization (密宗化) was equally inevitable. As a religion that formed and developed during the ***classical period***, early Mahayana Buddhism had already evolved characteristics adapted to ***classical society***, such as rationalism, ideological pluralism, and an emphasis on philosophical speculation. In classical India (古典印度), massive religious debates were phenomenally common. Even if rulers genuinely favored Mahayana Buddhism, it was impossible for them to venerate it exclusively, because the absolute bedrock of a ***classical empire*** lay in factional equilibrium. To secure an advantage in this competition, Mahayana Buddhism was structurally compelled to develop colossal, centralized academic centers dedicated to intensifying logical and dialectical training, accompanied by an exceptionally complex monastic organization.

Yet, by the time of the Pala Empire's (波罗王朝) ascension, although the ***social being*** (社会存在) of Bengal (孟加拉国) could sustain this ***classical empire***, other regions of India—particularly Northern India—had ultimately already **feudalized** (封建化). This precipitated a dynamic where Mahayana Buddhism's competitors began spontaneously mutating toward ***feudal religions*** (封建宗教). Most notably, Brahmanism (婆罗门教)—the indigenous religion with an ancient history precisely on the Indian subcontinent—essentially completed its transmutation into Hinduism (印度教).

Feudalized religions massively invested their attention into the social grassroots: the worship of principal deities was established, pilgrimage systems developed, and local deities were subsumed *(frequently, local goddesses appeared in the avatar of the wives of principal Hindu deities, which squarely met the demand for the emergence of national consciousness during the **feudal period**, especially in Southern India)*. Hindu temples began to assume the function of facilitating economic circulation within ***feudal society***. Outside the territories of the Pala Empire, Hinduism, having thoroughly adapted to the realities of ***feudalization***, repelled Buddhism across virtually the entire subcontinent.

This is not to imply that Hindu clerics abandoned debating Buddhist monks. Yet the era had undeniably mutated; Hinduism naturally still needed to prove its rectitude through debate, but this was no longer its primary imperative. For Mahayana Buddhism, it now possessed gargantuan academic institutions like the Nalanda Monastery (那烂陀寺) in vain, yet found itself "drawing its sword and looking around in bewilderment" (“拔剑四顾心茫然”); the rules of the game had fundamentally altered.

The organizational apparatus of a religion, having developed over several centuries, possesses its own terrifying inertia even if it no longer suits contemporary development. By the tail end of the

first millennium AD, even if the Pala Empire still maintained the façade of a ***classical empire***, within an increasingly **feudalizing** era, what rationale could massive and labyrinthine academic institutions like Nalanda Monastery, Vikramashila (超戒寺), and Odantapuri (飞行寺) possibly seek to justify their continued existence?

Tantrism provided an answer that appeared relatively rational at the time. First, Tantrism inherently absorbed certain consciousness of ***feudal religion***; more so than any other sect, it emphasized the application of expedient means (方便法门 / i.e., "shortcuts" in cultivation) during cultivation, largely shattering the precepts and even weaponizing secular desires for cultivation. However, in stark contrast to ***feudal religions***, Tantrism emphasized "control" over these cultivation shortcuts. It codified a suite of excruciatingly cumbersome mystical rituals and astronomically costly offering methods. This ensured that while commoners could still gaze upon the Buddha's ideology, achieving an exceptionally elevated realm of cultivation was fundamentally impossible for them.

Tantrism drastically reinforced the status of the Guru (上师), demanding absolute obedience and devotion to the Guru; in the absence of their guidance, success in esoteric cultivation was virtually impossible. Since the path of cultivation possessed a "Zhongnan shortcut" (终南捷径), yet such a shortcut was utterly impassable without a guide—and even with a guide, one was compelled to invest monumental energy and even wealth to decipher those mystical mantras and complete the labyrinthine religious rituals—the massive academic centers of Mahayana Buddhism forged during the ***classical period*** naturally found a renewed justification for their continued existence.

Simultaneously, the rulers identically derived satisfaction for their spiritual and political demands from this ideological mutation. Because only individuals possessing elevated social status could possibly complete the rituals and offerings, this undeniably fortified the rulers' superiority in identity.

The prosperity of the Pala Empire could not endure eternally. After 1000 AD, even the ***classical society*** of Bengal was marching toward its termination. On the eve of the Turkic Muslim invasions, Hindu regimes briefly regained supremacy in Bengal; however, by the 13th century, Islamic conquerors arrived here. Because the history of the Bengal region commenced relatively late, exactly when the Islamic regime conquered this area, the local ***feudalization*** process in Bengal was just nascent. Islam (伊斯兰教), in turn, is a religion that exhibits profound congruence with ***early feudal society***.

Consequently, in Bengal, Islam was able to gradually secure the support of the broad populace over centuries of rule, and came to be perceived as a mechanism to preserve Bengal's own independence within the vast ocean of Hinduism. Among the Chinese people, there frequently exists a prejudice asserting that Islam is a "religion of the desert," maximally suited for dissemination in arid and semi-arid regions. However, the histories of Bengal and maritime ***Southeast Asia*** conspicuously

negate this premise. Climate and topography do not directly dictate where Islam can or cannot take root; the genuinely decisive factor is permanently the local historical and social trajectory.

Today, taking India as the boundary, one discovers that the so-called Northern Buddhism (北传佛教) is fundamentally Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教), while Southern Buddhism (南传佛教) is fundamentally Theravada Buddhism (上座部佛教). This phenomenon is not accidental.

During the ascendance of Mahayana Buddhism, the entirety of the Eurasian continent was still ruled by several formidable regimes which, despite differing in their respective stages, could all be classified as ***classical empires*** (古典帝国). Furthermore, trade and international exchange were primarily conducted via the overland Silk Road (丝绸之路). When ***feudalization*** (封建化) had already swept across the vast majority of the Eurasian continent, the arteries of international trade shifted to the Maritime Silk Road (海上丝绸之路) across the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Western Pacific.

Even so, the entity that first achieved victory in ***Southeast Asia***—alongside Brahmanism (婆罗门教)—was still not the feudal Theravada Buddhism, but remained Mahayana Buddhism. For regions such as Cambodia (柬埔寨), Sumatra (苏门答腊), and Java (爪哇), the various conditions were insufficient to enable them to transition directly from an ***early state*** (早期国家) into a ***feudal society*** (封建社会). Even though the main arteries of international trade passed through ***Southeast Asia***, in terms of absolute distance, it was still far too distant from India and China.

During the five centuries from 1000 AD to the arrival of the Europeans, the ***classical society*** (古典社会) of the Indochinese Peninsula (中南半岛) and maritime ***Southeast Asia*** (海岛东南亚) *(although the latter was relatively primitive)* was disintegrating. Theravada Buddhism gained the favor of the "***barbarians***" (蛮族) from the north, ultimately securing ideological dominance over the Indochinese Peninsula with the exception of Vietnam (越南). Concurrently, Islam (伊斯兰教), propagating alongside commerce, was embraced by various Austronesian peoples (南岛各民族) and ultimately secured dominance over maritime ***Southeast Asia***.

Although Vietnam retained certain bureaucratic systems (官僚制度) originating from China, it historically took Mahayana Buddhism as its primary religion *(I do not regard Confucianism [儒家思想] as a religion)*. However, for a prolonged period following its independence from China, its

degree of feudalization was not low. The Red River Delta (红河平原) was developed relatively early, ultimately possessing advantages in population, technology, and organization; consequently, over a span of 1,000 years, it doubled its national territory by expanding southward.

(People might assume, because Vietnam is identically governed by the Communist Party today, that since its independence during our nation's Five Dynasties period [五代时期], Vietnam wholly inherited China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** *[复辟官僚制度]. However, according to my observation, until Western influence on Indochina became pronounced, Vietnam's* ***degree of feudalization*** *should not have been lower than that of the Tang Dynasty [唐代] in China, whether compared to the early Tang with its Fubing system [府兵制 / garrison militia system] or the mid-to-late Tang characterized by a proliferation of Fanzhen [藩镇 / regional military governors]. There was fundamentally no problem forming an organizational advantage over Champa [占婆] and the Khmer [高棉]).*

The more backward Philippines (菲律宾) became a Catholic nation due to Spanish colonial activities, but Islam identically reached its southern islands. As for East Timor (东帝汶) and the regions in eastern Indonesia where primitive faiths still exist, they severely lacked influence. The contemporary religious landscape of ***Southeast Asia*** was forged in this exact manner.

The reason Mahayana Buddhism, having entered ***East Asia*** via the Silk Road, is still regarded today as synonymous with Northern Buddhism is simply that China did not embark upon a normal ***feudalization*** process. The ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) successfully restored itself and has ruled for 14 centuries to the present day, and the concept of "China" *de facto* occupies the overwhelming majority of the population and territory in ***East Asia***.

Under such circumstances, let alone a ***feudalized religion***, even Mahayana Buddhism—capable of serving as the ideological pillar for a ***classical empire***—could not escape successive anti-Buddhist campaigns (灭佛运动). The monastic organizations of all religions in our nation suffered devastating destruction.

Although Mahayana Buddhism can barely be termed China's most popular religious faith even today, it has long degenerated into a dilapidated state. It possesses zero theoretical innovation, lacks any respectable monastic order (僧团), and bears absolutely no significant social function.

The sole meaning of its continued existence, the singular reason the rulers consider it useful, is practically reduced to what Karl Marx (马克思) referred to as the "opium of the people" (“人民的鸦片”) in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (《黑格尔法哲学批判》).

Although Japanese Buddhism (日本的佛教) belongs to Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教) due to the vectors of its dissemination, it underwent manifest changes during the ***feudalization*** (封建化) of the Japanese archipelago (日本列岛).

Distinct from the Mahayana Buddhism *(especially Esoteric Buddhism [密宗])* of the Heian period (平安时代)—which was supported by the imperial family (皇室) and nobility (贵族), and relied on esoteric arts (法术) and complex rituals (仪式) for the spiritual protection of the state (镇护国家)—Buddhism during Japan's ***Chūsei*** (中世 / ***Middle Ages***) underwent a monumental transformation.

Among these changes, the most conspicuous aspect was the End-of-Dharma ideology (末法思想) and the Pure Land ideology (净土思想). If one considers them alongside Christianity (基督教), one discovers something exceedingly fascinating. Buddhism maintains the theory of reincarnation (轮回论) consistent across Indian religions, which logically possesses a stark distinction from the eschatology / theory of judgment (审判论) held by Christianity and Islam (伊斯兰教). However, as Japan transitioned from a ***classical society*** (古典社会) to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), the End-of-Dharma and Pure Land ideologies applied a potent patch to the original view of reincarnation, causing it to trend toward the Last Judgment (末世审判) to a certain extent.

Naturally, Japanese ***medieval*** Buddhism also upheld the concept of reincarnation, but it intensified prophecies regarding eschatological catastrophes, amplified the terror and severe punishments of hell (地狱), and emphasized the salvific function (救赎作用) of faith and adherence to Buddhist guidance. ***Medieval*** Buddhism provided people with explicit cultivation goals and simplified cultivation methods. It posited that through active moral judgments and choices in the present life (现世), people could reap different outcomes after death: either being reborn (往生) into the pure and solemn Pure Land of the Buddha realm (佛国净土) to continue cultivation until attaining Buddhahood (成佛), or descending into the evil realms (恶道) to undergo perpetual reincarnation.

Medieval Buddhism prioritized practice and experiential understanding, reducing its reliance on scriptures. It emphasized "directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one's nature and attaining Buddhahood" (直指人心，见性成佛); its cultivation methods became more operational for the common populace, and Esoteric Buddhism correspondingly declined. Consequently, monks were able to penetrate deeply into society to propagate the Dharma (佛法) to ordinary citizens. Buddhist ideologies were gradually embraced by all social strata, and Buddhism participated increasingly deeply in social life, serving to provide public services.

By the mid-to-late Muromachi period (室町时代中后期), powerful monastic organizations (僧团组织) already possessed the capacity to mobilize and organize the populace to launch massive uprisings, and even displaced local ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) to establish their own regimes. Although Japanese Buddhism remained formally classified as Mahayana Buddhism, the disparities had become colossal. For instance, one can clearly observe that Japanese Buddhism emphasized the concept of "living Bodhisattvas" (菩萨在世) far less than Chinese Buddhism (中国佛教) did. After all, having undergone the baptism of ***feudal society***, the ideology of achieving salvation (救赎) through one's own faith and will had overwhelmed the concept of being saved by others through pious devotion.

These mutations occurring within Japanese ***medieval*** Buddhism demonstrate once again that certain fundamental postulates of Karl Marx (马克思) can genuinely be considered profound insights: ***social being*** (社会存在) determines ***social consciousness*** (社会意识) with such intense gravity. To the extent that, although Buddhism is a religion ostensibly vastly different from Christianity, as long as Japan's social structure approximated that of Western Europe (西欧), the religion *(or mainstream ideology)* prevalent in Japanese society would inevitably exhibit a tendency to evolve toward Western European ***feudal religions*** (封建宗教). This remained true even if the masters who founded the sects of Kamakura Buddhism (镰仓佛教) had never heard of God (上帝) and Jesus (耶稣), nor knew of Allah (真主) and Muhammad (穆罕默德).

Korean Buddhism (朝鲜佛教) was just as ill-fated as the peninsula (半岛) itself.

Goguryeo (高句丽), functioning as the easternmost terminus of the great migrations (民族大迁徙) during ***Late Antiquity*** (古典时代晚期) and the ***early feudal period*** (封建早期) *(here I refer to the timelines of "individual nations" rather than the standard European timeline, though at that time, the process of the great migrations across the Eurasian continent possessed chronological*

continuity), was completely blocked by the Xianbei people (鲜卑人) from advancing into ***the Central Plains***, compelling Goguryeo to exclusively expand southward into the Korean Peninsula. Because the Korean Peninsula was situated at the periphery of Chinese rule, it was far from being **feudalized** in that era, making it highly unlikely for ***The Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise*** (地主-官僚妥协) to occur here.

Silla (新罗) and Baekje (百济) at the southern tip of the peninsula also ascended rapidly under external influence. Observation here is prone to certain issues. Although Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekje appeared to possess certain ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征), I maintain that overall, the Three Kingdoms of Korea (朝鲜半岛三国) at that time had nowhere near developed into a genuine ***feudal society***. These three nations should be analogous to Japan during the Asuka and Nara periods (飞鸟奈良时期), fundamentally still belonging to the category of ***early states*** (早期国家). However, because China's sheer mass was overwhelmingly massive and excessively proximate, they suffered excessively potent influence. During the process of forcibly introducing the Chinese bureaucratic system (官僚制度), they augmented royal power (王权) and acquired a bureaucratic apparatus substantially stronger relative to their existing developmental stage.

If one assumes the Korean Peninsula is difficult to observe due to excessive interference from bordering China, a highly simple example can illustrate this point: Japan's Uji-Kabane system (氏姓制) *(of the late Kofun period [古坟时代晚期])* was highly likely connected to the Bone-rank system (骨品制度) implemented by Silla, namely, the former emulated the latter. Furthermore, even after Silla unified the Three Kingdoms, aristocratic politics (贵族政治) continued to exert a massive influence on this regime; attempts to emulate China in establishing a formidable bureaucratic system ultimately failed.

In reality, to a large extent, from the fifth century right up to the thirteenth century, the historical trajectory of the Korean Peninsula was fundamentally synchronized with that of Japan, merely exhibiting differences in manifestation. The Three Kingdoms of Korea period and the Unified Silla period (统一新罗时期) were exactly like Japan's Asuka and Nara periods *(in fact, the Balhae regime [渤海国政权] in Northeast China [中国东北地区] could identically be added to this sequence)*. They belonged to the stage where ***early states*** introduced the bureaucratic system from China to fortify centralized state power (中央集权). Foreign Buddhism was primarily utilized to consolidate royal power and provide spiritual protection for the state; this was indistinguishable from Japan, and Mahayana Buddhism was patently conducive to realizing this objective.

During the period when the Goryeo Dynasty (王氏高丽) ruled the Korean Peninsula (朝鲜半岛), the prosperous landscape of a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) emerged. From the latter half of the 10th century to the early 12th century, the centralized bureaucratic system (中央集权官僚体制) of this nation operated stably.

Unfortunately, what the Goryeo people could learn at that time was China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). For instance, the imperial examination system (科举) was utilized in Goryeo to elevate individuals from various strata to consolidate despotic rule (专制统治). Simultaneously, Goryeo rulers began establishing and encouraging the construction of a school education system guided by Confucianism (儒学). Such an excessively potent bureaucratic system during the ***classical period*** would subsequently bring immense difficulties to this peninsula.

The Goryeo regime was militarily highly formidable; the size of its army could be considered absolutely astonishing relative to the sheer mass of the Korean Peninsula. Goryeo exhibited a potent posture militarily when confronting the Liao Dynasty (辽朝) and the Jin Dynasty (金朝). This formidable state power rendered the Goryeo people more confident in diplomacy. They affirmed themselves as the "Empire East of the Sea" (海东的帝国) and believed they ought to possess their own tributary sphere (朝贡圈) modeled after China. The massiveness of architecture during the Goryeo period identically reflected the confidence of this Empire East of the Sea.

This empire indeed possessed numerous commendable attributes in technological innovation. Goryeo celadon (高丽青瓷) is arguably world-renowned, the *Tripitaka Koreana* (《高丽大藏经》) was inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, and movable metal type printing (金属活字印刷术) was identically invented here. Although Goryeo Buddhism (高丽佛教) during this period could not possibly occupy a monopoly position due to the flourishing of Confucianism, it identically enjoyed a golden age during the ***classical period*** of the Korean Peninsula.

In the final years of Goryeo, ***feudalization*** (封建化) occurred nonetheless. However, because the Korean Peninsula excessively introduced China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** during its ***classical zenith***—and did not, like Japan during the Heian period (平安时代), promptly abandon it upon discovering its incompatibility *(which was a phenomenal achievement; when Japan entered its* ***genuine classical zenith*** *during the Insei [院政] period, the Ritsuryo system [律令制] had de facto perished, and the identity among the samurai [武士] had already begun to develop)—****Korea***'s ***feudalization*** process was fraught with immense difficulties from the very inception.

Although the so-called Musin regime (武臣政权) of late Goryeo appeared formally somewhat similar to the Japanese shogunate (幕府), the Choe regime (崔氏政权) of Goryeo undeniably lacked the economic foundation and legitimacy to establish stable rule. I surmise that in essence, it was still a *warlord regime* from the period when the ***classical empire*** was about to disintegrate; however, because *Goryeo* itself was relatively small in scale, a single *warlord regime* was able to rule the entire country and could even pass down power hereditarily for several generations."

Buddhism, as the mainstream religion of ***Korea***, responded to these mutations. Zen Master Jinul (知讷禅师) established the Jogye Order (曹溪宗) during the period of military rule. He attempted to construct a new sect with rigorous precepts to unify the various factions within Korean Buddhism, and he amplified perspectives unique to Zen Buddhism (禅宗)—such as sudden enlightenment (顿悟)—to enable commoners to comprehend and embrace Buddhism. At this juncture, Goryeo Buddhism indeed exhibited a tendency to transform toward a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教), exactly like Japanese Buddhism.

The problem was that the Mongol (蒙古) invasions violently interrupted this. After being (indirectly) ruled by the Mongols for a century, the Goryeo regime did not usher in a renaissance; instead, it was replaced via a coup d'état by a general named Yi Seong-gye (李成桂), thereby establishing the Joseon Dynasty (朝鲜李朝).

The peculiarity of the Joseon regime lay in its achievement of a mutually beneficial win-win scenario between rulers by establishing a suzerain-vassal relationship (宗藩关系) with the Ming Dynasty (明朝) *(although stating it this way feels somewhat peculiar, anyone can ultimately discern that the Ming Dynasty was the suzerain, hence the word order remains unadjusted)*. The Ming emperor manifested the majesty of the Celestial Empire's (天朝) monarch through the "loyal" vassal state of Joseon, while the King of Joseon executed his bureaucratic rule domestically relying on the strength and the investiture endorsement of the Ming Dynasty.

Before the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty, although ***Korea*** did not undergo a conspicuous phase of ***classical empire*** collapse and ***barbarian*** invasion, nor did a genuine **feudal regime** (封建政权) emerge across the entire peninsula, it is fundamentally acceptable to identically regard Joseon as a **restoration-*bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家). The Joseon regime was indeed an excellent student of the Chinese empire; during its five centuries of rule, it fundamentally adhered to the

policy of "Revering Confucianism and Suppressing Buddhism" (“崇儒抑佛”), subjecting Buddhists to severe suppression and even persecution.

Korean Buddhism, exactly like the nation of ***Korea*** itself, marched into a dark age, never again undergoing the ***feudalization*** metamorphosis like its Japanese counterparts.

As two nations that successfully emancipated themselves from China's direct control, ***Korea*** (朝鲜) and Vietnam (越南) nonetheless remained subjected to massive Chinese influence, particularly in adopting the Chinese-style bureaucratic system (官僚制度)—naturally, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). Although the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** learned by the students was ultimately not as terrifying as the master's, the religions in these two regions *(naturally, primarily Buddhism [佛教])* were not reduced to a state of fundamental eradication. However, its prolonged stagnation in the morphology of the ***classical period*** (古典时期) was fundamentally incapable of satisfying the demands of societal development; after all, ***classical society*** (古典社会) had ceased to exist regardless.

When Europeans forcibly blew open the gates of various Asian nations with military might, the ***bureaucratic states*** (官僚国家) of ***Korea*** and Vietnam were defeated, and their ideological chaos and hollowness were rapidly exposed. Today in South Korea, Buddhism at best shares equal footing with Christianity (基督教); in reality, it is claimed that Christianity has become the largest religion in South Korea. Moreover, there are overwhelmingly numerous Christian denominations in South Korea, many belonging to house churches (家庭基督教) unmanaged by formal ecclesiastical structures. In Vietnam, although Buddhism *(predominantly Mahayana Buddhism [大乘佛教])* remains the largest organized religion, Catholicism (天主教) identically occupies a paramount influence within society. Furthermore, Vietnam birthed a cohort of indigenous religions synthesizing the ideologies of multiple sects, such as Hòa Hảo (和好教) and Cao Đài (高台教).

If we juxtapose these two nations with Japan (日本)—which successfully navigated the entire ***feudalization*** **process** (封建化过程) and whose religious faith identically completed adaptive mutations—the differences are glaringly apparent. Although Japan suffered aggression from Western powers and was defeated as an aggressor in World War II, this nation has marched toward secularization (世俗化) since the ***modern era***. Even among the demographic possessing religious faith, indigenous religious beliefs occupy a dominant position. If one further notices the exponential

proliferation of mosques in western China since the Reform and Opening-up (改革开放), alongside the vigorous expansion of rural Christian churches in ***the Central Plains*** (中原地区), it is not difficult to realize that the historical religious policies of ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** exert a phenomenally peculiar impact upon the contemporary religious landscapes of these nations.

Mahayana Buddhism was transmitted into China, ***Korea***, Japan, and Vietnam in the form of Exoteric Buddhism (显宗). Although Esoteric Buddhism (密宗 / Tantrism) inevitably propagated here later, it had already forfeited the possibility of generating colossal influence. China, ***Korea***, and Vietnam generally adopted a disparaging and suppressive attitude toward Buddhism; regardless of whether it was Exoteric or Esoteric, any organized religion constituted a threat to the ***bureaucratic state***. Japanese Buddhism, conversely, having undergone the baptism of the ***medieval*** feudal revolution, identically no longer required the labyrinthine rituals and mystical cultivation of Esoteric Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhism had already been transmitted to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (青藏高原) as early as the Tibetan Empire (吐蕃帝国) period; however, the political chaos during the late Tibetan Empire inflicted a devastating blow upon the development of Tibetan Buddhism (藏地佛教). Fortunately, at this juncture, the Pala Empire (波罗王朝) was still propping up the teetering classical system in northeastern India and continued to sponsor the comprehensively Tantricized Mahayana Buddhism. Chronologically, this granted Buddhism a second opportunity for transmission onto the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Ultimately, Mahayana Esoteric Buddhism discovered an environment conducive to its own development on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and, subsequently, the Mongolian Plateau (蒙古高原).

Although, formally speaking, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau identically entered a feudal state following the collapse of the Tibetan Empire, the climate here was ultimately severe, rendering it immensely difficult for secular regimes to shoulder the heavy burden of administrative management independently. Under these conditions, Buddhist monasteries frequently functioned as massive ***feudal lords*** (封建领主). Religion and religious organizations were compelled to participate deeply in social governance, and regimes in the Tibet (西藏) region exhibited tendencies toward a theocracy (政教合一) to varying degrees. When Tibetan Buddhism itself needed to emerge in the guise of a ruler, the doctrines and ***religious laws*** (教法) of Esoteric Buddhism became phenomenally meaningful, while the concept of "Bodhisattvas saving the world" (菩萨救世) proved highly conducive to inducing ideological submission among the ruled.

During its developmental trajectory, Tibetan Buddhism concurrently preserved Mahayana Esoteric doctrines and managed to adapt to the demands of ruling a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) under exceptional environments. For instance, the so-called institution of reincarnate lamas (活佛转世制度) was precisely such an invention adopted to maintain the stability of power transitions. During the late Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Mongolian pastoral areas (蒙古牧区) identically developed —either actively or passively—a **feudal system** (封建制度) *(as mentioned previously)*. Similar to the environment of the Tibetan regions, the Mongolian pastoral areas were identically harsh, possessing vast territories with sparse populations; administrative management and public services were fundamentally inseparable from religious organizations. Within the periphery of the Mongolian regions, the religion most adaptable to this circumstance was explicitly Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, it is entirely unsurprising that the Mongols universally adhered to Tibetan Buddhism during the three centuries prior to Russian intervention, not to mention that the Qing rulers persistently and deliberately propelled this dynamic.

Now shifting our gaze to Theravada Buddhism (上座部佛教), although the region where Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教) is prevalent is vastly larger in scale than that of Theravada Buddhism, the legendary nature of the latter is not diminished in the slightest.

Because the transmitted historical documents from nations such as Sri Lanka (斯里兰卡), Myanmar (缅甸), Thailand (泰国), Laos (老挝), and Cambodia (柬埔寨) are significantly fewer relative to the nations of Northern Buddhism (北传佛教), it is exceedingly difficult for people to accurately know how today's Theravada Buddhism evolved from the Sthavira school during the period of Sectarian Buddhism (部派佛教). How did today's Theravada Buddhism and the original "Buddhism of the Sthaviras" evolve in terms of ***religious doctrines*** (教义) and ***religious laws*** (教法)? After all, it was fundamentally impossible for the Sthaviras to have already adapted to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会)—which did not yet exist at the time—during the BC era. Even if there are still documents scattered across the world capable of revealing this, it is not something I can comprehend through the Internet from within China.

The cradle of Theravada Buddhism was Sri Lanka; initially, Ashoka (阿育王) dispatched his son to this region to propagate the Dharma. Interestingly, although Theravada Buddhism accompanied the entirety of Sri Lanka's history, Sri Lankan Buddhism did not remain utterly unchanged. I only happened to learn of this while playing a massive modification for Paradox's *Crusader Kings III* (《十字军之王 3》) entitled "Regional Immersion and Cultural Enrichment" (区域沉浸和文化丰富).

The earliest Buddhist sect transmitted into Sri Lanka subsequently evolved into the Mahavihara (大寺派), a sect that persistently adhered to Theravada doctrines. During the first century BC, the King of Sri Lanka sponsored the construction of the Abhayagiri Vihāra (无畏山寺), which later became the center of the Abhayagiri (无畏山派). This Buddhist sect embraced the ascendant Mahayana doctrines as well as the later Tantric (密宗) doctrines; Abhayagiri Vihāra seemingly became a center for Mahayana Buddhism.

Later, a branch of the Abhayagiri sect established the Jetavana Vihāra (祇陀林寺), forming the Jetavanavihara (祇陀林派) in the fourth century. This sect identically propagated Mahayana Buddhism, though it appeared more strategic in its competition with the Mahavihara sect. Beginning in the third and fourth centuries AD, Sri Lankan rulers began intentionally favoring the Abhayagiri sect. After the Relic of the tooth of the Buddha (佛牙舍利) was brought to Sri Lanka in the fourth century, it was enshrined at the Abhayagiri Vihāra; over the subsequent centuries, this location served as Sri Lanka's primary academic center.

At the dawn of the second millennium AD, Sri Lanka faced increasingly severe military invasions from the direction of Southern India (南印度). The Chola Dynasty (朱罗王朝), devoutly adhering to Hinduism (印度教), clearly had no necessity for—nor would they welcome—a massive monastery propagating classical Buddhism. Once Sri Lanka expelled the invaders and restored its independence, the rulers immediately pivoted toward the Mahavihara sect, suppressing the Abhayagiri and Jetavanavihara sects. Mahayana Buddhism and Tantrism ultimately perished in Sri Lanka.

The shifting balance of power among Sri Lankan Buddhist sects is exceptionally intriguing. It is fundamentally impossible for people to determine from historical documents exactly when Sri Lanka approximated a ***classical society*** (古典社会), and when it began marching toward a ***feudal society***. Yet, the saga of the rise and fall of these three Buddhist sects on an island of less than 70,000 square kilometers so vividly delineates the universal underlying laws of human societal development: transitioning from an ***early state*** (早期国家) into a ***classical society***, and subsequently marching from a ***classical society*** toward a ***feudal society***.

That Theravada Buddhism was able to secure a foothold on the Indochinese Peninsula (中南半岛) is inseparable from geographical conditions. After all, although Myanmar appears adjacent to India and Bengal, the overland transportation routes are truly excessively treacherous. Conversely, it was substantially easier to reach the Indochinese Peninsula via maritime routes from Southern India and Sri Lanka. Provided we tentatively concede that by the 11th century, Theravada Buddhism had

fundamentally completed its transmutation into a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教) in terms of doctrines and ***religious laws***, then it is not surprising in the slightest that the Bamar (缅人) and the Tai peoples (傣泰人) migrating southward from within Chinese territory selected Theravada Buddhism. This was the ***feudal religion*** they were most familiar with and found easiest to embrace.

The only thing that feels genuinely miraculous is Cambodia. This nation, functioning as the remnant of the Khmer Empire (高棉帝国), actually also selected Theravada Buddhism. However, this was precisely one of the correct choices the Cambodians made during the collapse of their ***classical empire*** (古典帝国); another correct choice was none other than abandoning Angkor (吴哥) and relocating the capital to Phnom Penh (金边).

The Khmer ruler Indravarman III (因陀罗跋摩三世) made the courageous decision to convert to Theravada Buddhism at a time when the empire was already tottering precariously under the offensives of the Thai people. As the ruler during the terminal phase of a ***classical empire***, although it was inevitable to perceive a cataclysmic disaster, to remain unbeguiled by the glory that had already become a fleeting illusion, and to proactively embrace the religion of the enemy, was undeniably phenomenal. (Naturally, as the ***feudalization*** process of Khmer society itself unfolded, Theravada Buddhism also expanded within the empire; therefore, it cannot be entirely characterized as the "religion of ***barbarian*** enemies.") Later, when Emperor Minh Mạng (明命帝) of Vietnam invaded Laos and Cambodia, he witnessed the potency of Theravada Buddhism in organizing national resistance. Consequently, he harbored a visceral hatred for Theravada Buddhism, wishing to eradicate it entirely from the lands conquered by the Vietnamese.

Indravarman III indeed succeeded. Although the disintegration of the ***classical empire*** was inevitable *(and it arguably ought to have disintegrated)*, the Cambodians at least preserved the core territory of the Khmer Empire, and the paternal ancestors of the current Cambodian royal family can be traced back furthest precisely to this courageous monarch. I maintain that the Khmer Empire's performance during its curtain call was superior to that of Byzantium (拜占庭); at the very least, Angkor Wat (吴哥窟) remains a World Heritage site and tourist destination belonging to Cambodia today.

Finally, let us briefly examine the Southwest China region wedged between two Buddhist worlds—more precisely, the Southwest China region during the rule of the Nanzhao (南诏) and Dali (大理) regimes.

Buddhism during the Nanzhao and Dali periods is colloquially referred to in China as Dian Esoteric Buddhism (滇密), academically known as Azhaliism (阿吒力教). Formally, this is undoubtedly a variant of Esoteric Buddhism (密宗), as it heavily promoted esoteric cultivation and the taking of shortcuts (捷径). However, the "esoteric" aspect of Dian Esoteric Buddhism was not characterized by scholastic, complex mystical rituals; rather, it more closely approximated a syncretism of various primitive faiths (原始信仰的杂糅), while concurrently being astonishingly lax regarding precepts (戒律).

The fact that this religion could flourish in both the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国) of Nanzhao and the **feudal regime** (封建政权) of Dali reflects the complex political landscape of the mountainous regions of Southwest China: even if a ***classical state*** (古典国家) or **feudal state** (封建国家) could be established relying on the limited plains *(the so-called "Bazi" [*坝子*])* nestled among towering mountains, the diverse and highly primitive tribes in the surrounding mountainous areas fundamentally could not be eradicated. Only industrial civilization (工业文明) is capable of achieving this.

In reality, if we recall the previously mentioned situation where the Chancellor family, the Gao clan (相国家族高氏), monopolized power during the Dali period, it is not difficult to discern that even though the Dali regime was originally established by Duan Siping (段思平) relying on the armed forces of various eastern tribal chieftains, it was still necessary to defend against these "savages" (野人) in the east after Dali was established. Regardless of whether the rulers of Nanzhao or Dali desired it, to avoid remaining in a perpetual state of hostility with these fundamentally ineradicable tribes, they were structurally compelled to make ideological compromises. Dian Esoteric Buddhism was precisely such a religion. Naturally, we must not forget that when Nanzhao and Dali confronted the colossal behemoth that was the Chinese empire (中华帝国), they indeed possessed a tangible necessity to maintain their independence through a unique religious culture; Dian Esoteric Buddhism identically assumed this function.

If ***feudal society*** (封建社会) in Southwest China had been able to progress further, we would naturally have reason to believe that Buddhism here would gradually have evolved the characteristics of a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教), but history clearly did not grant Yunnan (云南) this opportunity.

Thus, we have completed a brief, holistic examination of the history of Buddhism's propagation. By this point, readers can ostensibly realize that although Karl Marx (马克思) committed numerous errors, the postulate that ***social being*** (社会存在) determines ***social consciousness*** (社会意识) is genuinely a profound insight, even if it contained elements of guesswork during his era.

If future scholars can deeply research the commonalities between ***religious doctrines*** (宗教教义), ***religious laws*** (宗教教法), and the social structures of the regions where they flourish, it might highly likely be possible to realize such a "program": we would merely need to input the limited state parameters of a society to determine exactly what minimal characteristics the prevalent religion or ideology of that society ought to possess.

We can acknowledge this with complex emotions. Although currently it appears that individual free will still exists, for society as a whole, the manifestation of ***social consciousness*** genuinely lacks freedom. When a religion is capable of satisfying the demands generated by the extant developmental state of a society, it effectively occupies the position of ***social consciousness***. Unless another religion emerges that is more suitable and capable of replacing it, it is exceedingly difficult to alter, even through violent suppression. When the society itself undergoes mutations, the religion originally prevalent in that society must either adapt to these changes, or be eliminated by a religion —emerging from parts unknown—capable of adapting to the new circumstances.

What we observe is precisely this. Viewed from the perspective of the societal whole, what determines where a religion can develop is nothing more than two points: adaptation and the first-mover advantage. Concurrently, a brief review of the history of Buddhism can also assist us in more profoundly comprehending the characteristics and evolution of social ideologies during the ***classical period*** (古典时期) and the ***feudal period*** (封建时期).

People might criticize me for extensively examining religions currently prevalent in Asia while failing to carefully investigate the circumstances of Christianity (基督教); I will explain why I adopted this approach.

The first reason, naturally, is because attempting to understand Christianity in China—not merely a rough outline, but a detailed understanding of its developmental process and the disparities among various denominations—is truly far too difficult. On March 8, 2025, while waiting to enter the examination hall for the Teacher Qualification Certificate Examination at Chang'an No. 3 Middle School in Xi'an (西安市长安区第三中学), I strolled around this small campus. I was profoundly astonished to discover that the content on the school's cultural display board regarding the *Nestorian Stele* (《大秦景教流行中国碑》) from the Stele Forest in Xi'an (西安碑林) actually, and rather farcically, utilized Pinyin (拼音) censorship.

It referred to Christianity as the "JD-religion" (JD 教) and missionaries as "CJ-ers" (CJ 士); this derived from extracting the first letters of the Hanyu Pinyin for the four characters "Ji Du" (基督 / Christ) and "Chuan Jiao" (传教 / missionary). This left me fundamentally speechless. The Church of the East (东方基督教会) to which Nestorianism (景教) belonged has long since lost any influence today due to perennial subjugation under Muslim rule; this inexplicable paranoia is truly absurd.

Yet our nation's religious policy is precisely thus. Even though the *Nestorian Stele* is explicitly included as teaching content in middle school textbooks, absolutely no one is willing to violate taboos in public spaces and invite any unnecessary trouble. If readers can deeply perceive this reality, they will naturally understand why it is simply impossible for me to conduct an investigation into Christianity.

The second reason is that I possess absolute confidence in the research caliber of Western scholars regarding Christianity. Setting aside academic proficiency, Western scholars—purely due to their living environment—are inherently vastly more familiar with Christianity than an Easterner. Although I face difficulties in searching for and reading materials currently, I believe that articles and treatises introducing the developmental history of Christianity and its various denominations in detail must have been published long ago, making it entirely unnecessary to replicate the work.

28, Discussions Requiring Supplementation Regarding Certain Historical Problems Following the Failure of China's Feudalization

Personally, I believe that apart from certain minor details, the history of the Chinese empire (中华帝国) over the more than 1,400 years following the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) dynasties fundamentally requires no further discussion. This is precisely the history of a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) hurtling relentlessly toward a dead end; it is the history of the catastrophes suffered by the Chinese people intensifying progressively.

However, regardless of the circumstances, one invariably discusses the history of one's own nation more extensively than that of other nations, and accessing relevant materials is correspondingly easier. During the year and a half since I returned to Xi'an (西安), numerous issues concerning the Chinese empire subsequent to the bureaucratic restoration have frequently featured in daily discussions between my friends and me.

Regarding these issues of Chinese history that have long confounded domestic and foreign researchers, the unanimous consensus among my friends and me is that the fundamental reason these problems emerged and appear difficult to explain is ultimately caused by the ***restoration-***

bureaucratic system (复辟官僚制度)—namely, China itself embarked upon an irrevocable, divergent path. The reason scholars are plagued by these problems is that they fundamentally fail to realize that the ***restoration of the bureaucratic system*** actually occurred in China, and that China failed to undergo ***feudalization*** (封建化) during the precise historical epoch when it logically ought to have feudalized.

People have been psychologically bluffed by this walking corpse (行尸走肉) of a decrepit empire, which is an exceedingly fascinating phenomenon. It is exactly analogous to the short story *The Emperor's New Clothes* (《皇帝的新装》) authored by the Danish fairy tale writer Hans Christian Andersen: the Sui, Tang, Song (宋), Yuan (元), Ming (明), and Qing (清) dynasties were merely that emperor who believed he was fully clothed yet was utterly naked. However, whether it was the subjects ruled by this emperor or the populace outside this empire, surprisingly, not a single person dared to point out bluntly that this emperor was nothing more than a stark-naked man who wore fundamentally nothing. Even after this foolish emperor had been crushed multiple times by the "***barbarians***" (蛮夷) he despised, those former victors actually dared not even conceive that the Chinese empire was merely such a pathetic entity. Such a circumstance is truly astonishing; since the dawn of human history, no one has ever heard such a farce.

The **first** frequently discussed issue is whether, following the disintegration of China's unified ***classical state*** (古典国家) at the end of the Jin Dynasty (晋朝末年), the Southern Dynasties (南朝) regimes exiled in Jiangzuo (江左 / Left of the Yangtze River) could have normally feudalized.

Readers have presumably noticed that when I initially considered the issue of China's ***feudalization***, I adopted a perspective prioritizing the North over the South, engaging in minimal discussion regarding the Six Dynasties of Jiangzuo (江左六朝). My rationale for employing this approach is that, from my perspective, based on the historical realities of that era, it was Northern China (北中国) rather than Southern China (中国南方) that determined the destiny of China as a whole. This is because, regardless of what mutations occurred in the South and the North, up until the 7th century AD, Northern China undeniably maintained a conspicuous advantage in population and economy, which rendered the mutations in Southern China structurally devoid of significance in the long term.

Even if the ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制) was preserved continuously in Southern China through certain mutations, had Northern China normally feudalized—regardless of whether ethnic minorities or the Han Chinese (汉族) spearheaded this process—relying on the geostrategic imbalance between Northern and Southern China alongside the North's contemporary demographic

and economic advantages, I maintain it is highly improbable that the Southern Dynasties could have completed the Northern Expedition (北伐). Confronting even an initially feudalized northern regime would have been phenomenally difficult.

At the very least, what occurred in the real world was that even after four dynasties had successively replaced one another in the South, and the North-South division had exceeded two centuries, merely a single exiled Hou Jing (侯景) was sufficient to turn the lower reaches of the Yangtze River (长江下游) upside down. Furthermore, considering the technological level and the degree of Southern development during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝时期) period, if the Southern Dynasties constituted a ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) unifying Southern China, this regime would have *de facto* found it genuinely difficult to resolve the problem of political stability, particularly during dynastic transitions. Along the entire Yangtze River stood three highly independent regional political and economic centers: Chengdu (成都), Jiangling (江陵), and Jiankang (建康). The southern regime was inevitably forced to plunge into attrition between military efficiency and political security, a dilemma practically impossible to resolve at that time.

Since a bureaucratic regime unifying the South could not annihilate the (potentially multiple) **feudal regimes** (封建政权) in the North over several centuries, once Northern China entered its ***High feudal period*** (封建盛期), what probability was there for the Southern Dynasties regime to survive an expedition by reorganized northern warriors (北方武士)? I perceive zero possibility of this.

Conversely, even if Southern China genuinely feudalized due to various reasons, as long as the historical evolution of Northern China remained identical to ***Our Timeline*** (本位面), then one must consider that when the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** first emerged, its military power was not weak, because it ultimately retained numerous ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征). The massive military deployments of the Sui Dynasty and the early Tang Empire were fundamentally sustained precisely by the North.

Yet in the 7th century, Southern China was at best in an ***early feudal society*** (早期封建社会). Moreover, due to realistic geographical reasons, there would exist at least four distinct regimes *(Yizhou [益州], Jingzhou [荆州], Yangzhou [扬州], and Jiaozhou [交州] are highly unlikely to maintain a unified state under feudal conditions)*. The probability of surviving the strikes of a northern ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** was marginal; they would roughly share the same fate as the Dali Kingdom (大理国).

Therefore, during China's Northern and Southern Dynasties, it was the North, rather than the South, that determined the destiny of China.

Although Chinese people would likely not ask such a question, foreigners unaware of the underlying context might very well say: Since Southern China (中国南方) was developed relatively late compared to Northern China (北中国), is it possible that Southern China's ***classical era*** (古典时代) only commenced after the ***classical era*** of Northern China had concluded?

I maintain that this is impossible. From the Qin Dynasty (秦朝) to the Western Jin (西晋), Northern and Southern China maintained unification for over four centuries. Even calculating from the mid-reign of Emperor Wu of Han (汉武帝), the North and South were unified under China's ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制) for three centuries. Even if China's ***classical bureaucratic system*** was engineered with a predilection for predation from its very inception, the governance capacity of this system during the ***classical period*** (古典时期) was by no means poor. Classical China's ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) was absolutely among the highest of all ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) globally; only Rome could be compared with it.

The Hua-Xia peoples (诸夏民族) had already established their supremacy within the East Asian region on the eve of unification, and the assimilation measures propelled during the Han Dynasty—particularly during Emperor Wu's reign—were phenomenally efficacious. Therefore, while it is a factual reality that the development of Southern China lagged behind that of Northern China, it can hardly be regarded as an independent civilizational zone. This is vastly different from the relationship between Bangladesh (孟加拉国) and Northern India (北印度). Although Bangladesh largely submitted to the Indian ***classical empires*** under the rule of the Mauryan Empire (孔雀王朝) and the Gupta Empire (笈多王朝), compared to China, the political system of classical India was excessively decentralized; structurally, the various locales essentially remained in a state of autonomy.

Northern China and Southern China existed within a unified regime for a prolonged period. The advanced technologies of the North were rapidly transmitted to the South, to say nothing of the massive southward demographic migrations following the end of the Western Jin. Just like the ***barbarians*** (蛮族) who entered the imperial frontiers during the terminal phase of ***classical empires***, the **level of productive forces** (生产力水平) in Southern China developed to a degree where the ***feudal economic system*** (封建经济制度) became dominant in an exceedingly brief

period. Consequently, the conditions for it to independently enter a ***classical period*** fundamentally did not exist.

Examining the specifics, the possibility of ***feudalization*** (封建化) in the Southern Dynasties (南朝) basically did not exist in reality either. The reason some people might assume the Southern Dynasties could have evolved into a **feudal regime** (封建政权) is, nine times out of ten, due to a misjudgment regarding "aristocratic politics" (门阀政治).

The so-called "aristocratic politics" of the Eastern Jin (东晋) maintained a considerable distance even when compared against the threshold of ***feudalization***. This is because, essentially, aristocratic politics still relied upon status within the bureaucratic system to acquire land, rather than utilizing the wealth and martial force derived from controlled land to acquire political status.

There is an ostensibly obvious problem that is particularly prone to being overlooked: the so-called Southern Dynasties were vastly different from the Eastern Roman Empire (东罗马帝国). Before the administrative division of the Roman East and West, Constantinople (君士坦丁堡) had already served as the capital for 70 years, and the imperial bureaucratic apparatus had been comprehensively reconstructed in Constantinople. The Eastern Jin, conversely, established an exiled regime in extreme haste when the North spiraled completely out of control; it was not that easy for them to establish resistance in the South.

For several of the renowned great clans of the Eastern Jin—such as the Wang clan of Langya (琅琊王氏), the Yu clan of Yingchuan (颍川庾氏), and the Xie clan of Chenjun (陈郡谢氏)—if the **colossal chaos in the Central Plains** (中原大乱) directly triggered by the War of the Eight Princes (八王之乱) had not occurred, the overwhelming majority of their estates would naturally have been procured in the affluent North. Why did these southward-migrating scholar-elites (士族) re-acquire massive manors (庄园) and countless servants in Southern China by the late Eastern Jin? Because they acquired this precisely through their elevated positions within the bureaucratic system.

For example, the reason Wang Dao (王导) was able to monopolize power was that the Wang clan of Langya had already established an intimate relationship with the Sima family (司马家族) within the politics of the principality when Sima Rui's (司马睿) branch was enfeoffed as the Prince of Langya. The key reason Yu Liang (庾亮) was able to ascend so rapidly lay precisely in his usurpation of massive power utilizing his identity as an external relative of the emperor (外戚).

The power of the Eastern Jin scholar-elites was never predicated upon their control over the means of production or their dominant position over production. Instead, it was perpetually parasitic upon imperial power (皇权), and it was even less possible for them to be relatively independent of the bureaucratic system. Therefore, a phenomenally realistic problem is that within the aristocratic politics of the Eastern Jin, both the great clans and the royal Sima clan possessed a shared necessity to maintain the operation of the bureaucratic system, even though they frequently utilized their own privileges to sabotage its functioning.

Starting from the Liu Song Dynasty (刘宋), aristocratic politics was charting a continuous course toward decline. The rulers of the Liu Song Dynasty had already begun to restore the bureaucratic system's supportive function for monarchical despotism (君主专制). At this juncture, the so-called "distinction between the gentry and commoners" (士庶之别)—epitomized by the phrase "There are no poor families in the upper ranks, and no noble families in the lower ranks" (上品无寒门，下品无士族)—essentially reflected exactly the decay of the scholar-elites' status as massive landowners. When a class's dominant position is completely unchallenged, it fundamentally has no necessity to repeatedly emphasize its own superiority and exceptionality; it only does so when its status has already begun to waver.

Starting from Emperor Xiaowu of Song, Liu Jun (宋孝武帝刘骏), monarchical power was rapidly augmented and managed to maintain a relatively elevated level throughout the entirety of the Southern Dynasties. Undoubtedly, the rulers of the Southern Dynasties indeed weaponized certain factors advantageous to a bureaucratic empire, including the tax contributions brought by the Qiao-zhi (侨置州郡 / immigrant commanderies and counties), as well as the facilitative effect of the popularization of paper on administrative management and the promotion of individuals from poor backgrounds (寒门).

In summary, expecting Southern China to play a decisive role in the ***feudalization*** of the entire nation during the great migrations of ethnic minorities is genuinely unrealistic.

The **second issue** involving nationalism *(although nationalism inherently did not exist at the time)* is: If China's ***feudalization*** (封建化) had occurred, would it inevitably have been dominated by ethnic minorities (少数民族)? Although this question possesses not a shred of practical significance, it pertains to historical evaluation.

My answer to this is: If China's ***feudalization*** had proceeded normally, it is highly probable that—similar to what transpired in Europe—the dominant power would have fallen into the hands of ethnic minority rulers. However, fundamentally no one can preclude a low-probability event,

namely, that under the military pressure of foreign ethnicities, Han Chinese landlords (汉族地主) rapidly transformed into ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) and, under the command of a formidable military leader, spearheaded the ***feudalization*** process. After all, we observed precisely this phenomenon in Ethiopia; although Islam projected an aggressively ferocious posture, Christian Ethiopia, retreating to the hinterlands of the plateau, nevertheless accomplished a counter-attack subsequent to its ***feudalization***.

I maintain that if the ethnic minorities failed to resolutely select ***feudalization*** over bureaucratization, it would be fundamentally impossible for the various nomadic tribes (诸胡) to secure dominance across the entirety of China. Although the Han Chinese (汉族) population suffered precipitous reductions due to perennial warfare, during any period since the Han Dynasty, the Han Chinese unquestionably remained the most populous ethnicity within Chinese territory *(measured by modern national borders)*. Therefore, the most probable landscape of a "feudal China" (封建中国) would be that the rulers of certain regimes were ethnic minorities who had **"*Entered the Pass*"** (入关), while the rulers of other regimes remained Han Chinese.

The ethnic minority feudal rulers would naturally promote their own cultures within their domains, and the Chinese language (汉语) might identically fracture into several relatively distinct languages. However, the reality that China remained within a single cultural sphere would not alter; these nascent Sinitic languages would broadly remain mutually intelligible. If feudal China possessed a unified church, then Classical Chinese (古典汉语) would presumably still serve as the religious language of this church.

Once China entered the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期), the southern regimes might have secured an even greater advantage relative to the northern regimes. This is because historically, a crucial reason why Northern China exhibited a colossal advantage over Southern China lay precisely in the fact that a bureaucratic empire relied upon the registration of households and homogenization of the populace (编户齐民); vast, contiguous plains are undeniably conducive to this, allowing the extractive capacity of the Chinese empire to be maximally exerted. Once the entire nation underwent universal ***feudalization***, the North's advantage relative to the South would diminish substantially. Furthermore, the flourishing of maritime trade would principally advantage the southern **feudal regimes** (封建政权) in their transition toward an ***early modern society*** (近世社会). This implies that it was highly probable the Han Chinese would re-unify the Han cultural sphere—or at least secure a dominant position—during the ***early modern era***.

However, a far more ideal scenario naturally would be directing their gaze overseas to execute expansion; the entire periphery of China and the Nanyang (南洋 / ***Southeast Asia***) would have

become the prey of China's feudal regimes. Therefore, I contend that even analyzed from the standpoint of Han nationalism, ***feudalization*** remained a superior trajectory. The Han Chinese would not have been so easily defeated, and following the tempering of a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), they would only have emerged vastly stronger.

Moreover, I have never endorsed those grand narratives (宏大叙事) that have calloused my ears from over-repetition. In the final analysis, the interests of the Han ethnicity are constituted by the interests of trillions of ordinary Han individuals. We merely belong to the Han ethnicity in terms of identity, but what essential difference do we possess compared to individuals categorized under other ethnicities? Reflecting upon the catastrophic path the Chinese empire historically embarked upon—a path fundamentally unfathomable to ordinary human reasoning—it is genuinely difficult to assert how much value truly remains in the rigid adherence to language and religion.

The **third issue** involves the Tang-Song Transition (唐宋之变). Research concerning the mutations in Chinese society from the Tang Dynasty (唐朝) to the Song Dynasty (宋朝) has a history exceeding a century, and in terms of details, there is fundamentally nothing left to supplement. Generally speaking, the multifaceted mutations of Chinese society from the Tang to the Song were, in essence, entirely the consequence of the ***ebb tide of feudalization*** (封建化退潮) and the intensification of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度).

The core lies in the fact that one of the two primary characteristics of ***feudal society*** most heavily emphasized by Chinese scholars *(the other being "small-scale production" [小规模生产])*—namely, massive landownership (大土地所有制)—vanished from China to a certain degree. This is not to say that massive landlords did not exist in post-Song China; yet the factual reality remains that post-1000 AD, the degree of land concentration in China was already astronomically inferior to that of feudal Europe, exhibiting a progressively dispersive trend. China's massive estate owners, or in colloquial terms, massive landlords (大地主), could not possibly exist as ***feudal lords***, nor could they exert the considerable influence in state politics that the great clans (世族) lingering during the Tang Dynasty still maintained.

By this point, the ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征) possessed by the Chinese empire had essentially vanished completely. The military service system of granting land in exchange for military obligations; the land-based stipends linking the scale of granted land to bureaucratic rank; and the Fanzhen (藩镇 / regional military governors) possessing relatively independent administrative, personnel, and economic powers within their jurisdictions—all had been utterly

eradicated. From the Song Dynasty through to the Qing Dynasty, the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级) never again confronted the bureaucratic imperial court (官僚朝廷) in the capacity of ***feudal lords***.

The fact that the Tang-Song empires were able to orchestrate this earth-shattering grand ***restoration of the bureaucratic system*** indeed required exhaustive scheming. This included utilizing ***co-optation through official ranks and stipends*** (官位荣禄收买) to induce the great clans to disdain the control of the means of production and the production process; intentionally propelling **partible inheritance** (析产制) regarding property succession at the legal level; weaponizing the Grand Canal (大运河) to drastically augment the extractive capacity of the central government; and exploiting the imperial examination system (科举制度) to co-opt small estate owners into the hierarchical bureaucratic government. Although the outcome was catastrophic, absolutely anyone must concede that the despotic monarchs of China possessed an undeniably terrifying capability to realize this bureaucratic restoration.

However, an exceedingly fascinating historical reality is that, analyzed from the perspective of historical development, the **"*Song System*"** (宋制) was ostensibly far more "evil" than the **"*Tang System*"** (唐制). Compared to the Tang Dynasty, the paramount objective of the Song government was pointing its bayonets inward; what the rulers worried about most was their own subjects rather than foreign ***barbarians***. Consequently, one discovers a phenomenally bizarre phenomenon emerging in ***East Asia***: although ***the Song System*** represented the further advancement of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制), its destructiveness outside of China was actually exceedingly limited.

On the one hand, the evolution of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) drastically emasculated China's capacity to interfere in peripheral regions. Even for proximate regions like ***Korea*** (朝鲜) and Vietnam (越南), I do not believe post-1000 AD China could exercise long-term control, let alone execute assimilation. On the other hand, **the *Tang System*** possessed a fatal attraction for the pre-feudal regimes surrounding China. China long occupied a leading position as the civilizational epicenter and vanguard of social development in ***East Asia***; when China had already bypassed the **classical stage** (古典阶段), numerous peripheral regions still belonged to the ***early state*** (早期国家) stage.

The Tang system retained numerous ***feudal characteristics*** (封建因素), particularly in preserving a space for the great aristocratic clans (世家大族) within the political structure. For nations marching toward the ***classical period*** (古典时期) where the nobility still played a vital role in politics, this

became an imitable institution. Because ***the Tang system*** partially retained the superiority of the feudal military apparatus while concurrently utilizing formidable bureaucratic measures to maintain regimentation and extortion over the entire society, its short-term military performance was naturally spectacular. Compared to ordinary ***classical bureaucratic systems***, ***the Tang system*** endowed rulers with astronomically more potent ***despotic power*** (专制性权力); this temptation was utterly irresistible.

Therefore, the historical reality one observes is that emerging regimes on China's periphery frequently coveted the introduction of ***the Tang system*** on the eve of their ***classical society***'s (古典社会) formation. This was particularly conspicuous in ***Northeast Asia***. The reason is exceedingly simple: ***Northeast Asia*** at that time could essentially only receive influence from China, whereas regimes in the West and South could at least recognize that China was far from being the entirety of the world.

As we pointed out slightly earlier when discussing the Goryeo Dynasty (王氏高丽), introducing the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** of the Tang era during the ***classical period*** or slightly earlier was cataclysmic; it fundamentally severed the possibility of subsequent normal ***feudalization*** (封建化) in that region. ***Korea*** and Vietnam were profoundly victimized by this.

Situations only mutated in two specific locales. Because Japan (日本) introduced ***the Tang system*** prematurely, it "gave up halfway" (半途而废), inadvertently obliterating obstacles to ***feudalization***. This stands as a rare paradigm in human history where doing nothing drastically surpassed taking action. Although Nanzhao (南诏) identically introduced ***the Tang system***, the clan tribes in the mountainous terrain of Southwest China were simply too numerous and fundamentally impossible to annihilate, which furnished the conditions for Duan Siping (段思平) to harness the power of various tribes to seize Dali (大理) and establish a **feudal state** (封建国家).

Conversely, ***the Song system*** could not possibly become an option for peripheral regimes *(at least not until bureaucratization had reached a certain critical threshold)*. This was because, *de facto*, there was fundamentally no structural position left within ***the Song system*** for the nobility as an independent political force. For the rulers of ***Korea*** and Vietnam who had just expelled Chinese forces from their borders, this was a system entirely incapable of functioning. This is a phenomenally speechless state of affairs: **it was so bizarrely evil that others were fundamentally incapable of imitating it.**

It is exactly akin to the animated series *Family Guy* (《Family Guy》) produced by America's Fox Broadcasting Company. Even though every single member of the Griffin family is comparable to a

beast, it is exceedingly difficult for people to believe this cartoon would generate disastrous social impacts. Because the behavior of the animated characters is so utterly depraved, the possibility of emulation fundamentally does not exist; individuals like Peter could not possibly exist in real life. Although the Song Dynasty was ostensibly vastly more friendly toward despotic monarchs, the rulers of Goryeo and Vietnam could only stare in sheer frustration.

At this juncture, people might raise another query: Since you previously asserted that Southern China and Northern China were unified under a single regime for a prolonged period and could not independently undergo the classical stage again, why do you simultaneously contend that ***Korea*** and Vietnam could? This is an exceedingly excellent question. ***Korea*** and Vietnam ultimately possessed distinctions in their relationships with China.

Chinese rule indeed once penetrated deeply into the Korean Peninsula, but that merely lasted for a little over a century during the latter half of the Western Han (西汉). Subsequently, it rapidly retracted, halting at the northwestern corner. The Eastern Han (东汉) already found the Lelang Commandery (乐浪郡) arduous to administer. Over the subsequent 400-plus years since the end of the Han Dynasty, the entire peninsula fundamentally remained heavily insulated from Chinese influence, and the subsequent presence of the Tang Dynasty was merely a fleeting flash in the pan. The first regime capable of representing the Korean Peninsula, namely Unified Silla (统一新罗国), originated in the southern part of the peninsula which had never been ruled by China; post-unification, its capital remained in present-day Gyeongju (庆州市), South Korea, at the southeastern tip of the peninsula. This signifies that the direct influence of the Chinese empire in ***Korea*** was ultimately limited; the peninsular regime could genuinely maintain a relatively independent historical evolutionary trajectory.

Vietnam was entirely different. From Emperor Wu of Han's conquest of the south until its independence from China in the mid-10th century, it was subjected to the rule of Chinese regimes for almost an entire millennium. From the precise moment Vietnam achieved independence from China, it was fundamentally impossible for it to evolve again sequentially from an ***early state***, to a ***classical state*** (古典国家), and finally to a **feudal state**. The economic foundation of the so-called prominent great clans (世家豪强) during Vietnam's Đinh (丁朝) and Lý (李朝) dynasties was already predicated upon massive feudal manors (封建大庄园)—this irrefragably belongs to a post-***classical characteristic***.

Therefore, we observe that while Vietnam perpetuated the Chinese bureaucratic system, it simultaneously retained a considerable quantum of ***feudal characteristics*** *(alongside the village* ***communities*** *[村社] universally prevalent within the exceptional environments of* ***Southeast Asia****)*. Yet overall, it was indeed capable of transitioning sequentially from ***the Tang system*** to ***the Song***

system, eventually even reaching a stage where it could emulate the Ming-Qing system (明清体制) under the rule of its final imperial regime, the Nguyễn Dynasty (阮朝). Compared to ***Korea***, Vietnam indeed resembled a "Mini-China" (“小中国”) far more closely, though this is unequivocally not a complimentary description.

The **fourth issue** is exceedingly simple, primarily concerning the mutations between China's Song (宋) and Ming (明) dynasties; this is ostensibly an issue that academia observed long ago and has debated passionately.

Indeed, from a formalistic perspective, the dynastic succession from Song to Yuan (元) and subsequently to Ming over a span of roughly a century and a half seemingly subjected China to earth-shattering transformations. An era characterized by openness, ideological flourishing, technological advancement, and vibrant foreign trade *(especially private trade)* was terminated. It was replaced by the Ming Empire: extremely conservative, ideologically withered, technologically regressive, with foreign trade strictly restricted and highly shriveled. Such mutations are truly far too conspicuous for anyone to conceivably ignore. Consequently, many individuals inevitably generate rather bizarre perceptions, such as asserting that the Song Dynasty already constituted China's **"*early modern society*"** (近世社会). The reason I use quotation marks is because I maintain that China fundamentally never reached an ***early modern society***.

Furthermore, the responsibility for China's trajectory toward failure is frequently hurled onto the heads of the Mongols (蒙古人) or Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋). Regarding this, my evaluation is: although I harbor zero desire to deny the colossal destruction inflicted by Mongol expansion upon various global regions, nor the crimes too numerous to record committed by Zhu Yuanzhang himself as a tyrant, the regression of the Chinese empire was absolutely not the consequence of the Yuan and Ming dynasties reversing the historical developmental trajectory. This is because the so-called prosperous landscape of the Song Dynasty fundamentally possessed zero sustainability.

First, let us examine the factors that enabled Song Dynasty China to exhibit a transient landscape of cultural flourishing. Primarily, people cannot ignore the fact that the Song rulers, in order to consolidate the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制), indeed granted massive preferential treatment and cultivation to medium and small landlords. This enabled them to secure immense profits by integrating into the bureaucratic system, facing risks vastly lower than during the Ming and Qing (清) periods. To a certain extent, this indeed successfully deceived the ***landlord class*** (地主阶级), making them believe they were genuinely "ruling the nation" and engendering enthusiasm for participating in social affairs.

Secondly, it is impossible for us not to notice that nautical technologies enabled China to intervene deeply in international trade from the southeast. Because of its massive total economic volume, China became one of the most paramount participants in global commerce; the high frequency of foreign exchange naturally identically facilitated ideological and technological progress. However, these realities never altered the fundamental essence of Song society: **it was a society under the absolute domination of the *restoration-bureaucratic system*.**

If we list the social identities of the renowned mathematicians and scientists from the Song, Liao (辽), Jin (金), and Yuan periods, the reality becomes blindingly clear: **they were almost exclusively officials.** Figures such as Shen Kuo (沈括), Yang Hui (杨辉), Qin Jiushao (秦九韶), Su Song (苏颂), Li Ye (李冶), Guo Shoujing (郭守敬), and Wang Xun (王恂) either entered the civil service through conventional channels or were elevated within the bureaucratic system; this roster even produced Jinshi (进士 / highest examination graduates), Chancellors (宰相), and Grand Secretaries (大学士). Over the 400 years of the Song and Yuan, it could be said that the sole scholar whose name was passed down as a mathematician and educator without the obligatory addition of an official identity was Zhu Shijie (朱世杰) of the Yuan Dynasty. To a certain extent, this itself was the consequence of the Mongol rulers' lack of enthusiasm for the bureaucratic system.

This single point is sufficient to definitively distinguish the Song Dynasty from a genuine ***early modern society***. The relationship between the scientific and technological development of the Song-Yuan period and the bureaucratic system could no longer be encapsulated merely as "closely connected," but was arguably a relationship of tight parasitism. Outside the bureaucratic apparatus, scholars had virtually zero access to sufficient resources and information, let alone the capacity to organize and propel scientific research. Even though Zhu Shijie was a mathematician and his achievements were magnificent, in the final analysis, they could be accomplished requiring merely paper, brushes, a few books printed with predecessors' discoveries, and a brilliant mind. But could mechanical engineering and astronomical observation be achieved this way?

The factual reality is that the sponsorship of science and technology by the **aristocratic stratum** (贵族阶层), religious churches (宗教教会), and merchant guilds (商人行会) was virtually unobservable in Song-Yuan China; even if it existed, it was utterly negligible under the overwhelming shadow of the bureaucratic system. This bears absolutely zero relation to a genuine ***early modern society***.

The so-called urbanization of the Song Dynasty was identically a grotesque urbanization engineered under bureaucratic extortion. The engine of urban development lay in the astronomical consumption of the imperial family and officials who obtained their dividends from the bureaucratic system, while the existential purpose of the colossal urban population was strictly to satisfy their insatiable luxury. The investment in culture and the arts by the Song rulers *(this inherently includes the bureaucrats)* at least generated relatively considerable impacts; after all, no one can deny that those

literary and calligraphic works genuinely possess high aesthetic value. However, the investment in science and technology was egregiously microscopic relative to the total volume of social wealth expropriated. This is to say nothing of the fact that under the bureaucratic system, even if technological innovations occasionally materialized, the entire society structurally lacked the motivation to apply and refine them.

Ideologically, characterizing the Ming Dynasty as throwing it violently into reverse is undeniably correct; the problem is that the ideological mutations during the Song Dynasty inherently did not look optimistic either. The overarching ideological mutation throughout the Song Dynasty skewed toward conservatism: cardinal social ethics (纲常伦理) were reinforced, commercial activities were critiqued, and the familial status of wives and children was further degraded. The status of the Confucian Four Books (儒家四书) had already gradually ascended during the Song Dynasty; by the Yuan Dynasty, the Four Books and Five Classics (四书五经) were formally established as the primary content for examinations, explicitly mandating that examinees must interpret them strictly according to Zhu Xi's (朱熹) commentaries.

To speak frankly, I fundamentally fail to discern even a single shred of **early modern characteristics** in Song-Yuan society. Under such developmental momentum, what is there to find surprising about its subsequent evolution into Ming-Qing society?

The economic development of the Song (宋) and Yuan (元) dynasties possesses identical deceptiveness. What people frequently easily overlook is that the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) had already exhibited a profound impotence regarding management and participation in economic development. This is not surprising in the slightest. I have previously pointed out that one of the most paramount significances of ***feudalization*** (封建化) lies in the reconstruction of the social structure: the ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) of the regime, following its regression during the ***Early Middle Ages***, ushered in a colossal restoration during the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期).

Yet China fundamentally never underwent this process. The factual reality is that although the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) ensured that the emperor's ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) reigned supreme globally, the ***infrastructural power*** of this system was vastly weaker than ordinary people imagine. After 1000 AD, Europe, having reached the ***High Middle Ages***, became a primary engine of the global economy. The Islamic world (伊斯兰世界) and Southern India (南印度) simultaneously remained highly integrated into the trade network, with Muslims becoming the dominators of the maritime economic arteries. An international trade system of such complexity

was entirely beyond the capacity of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** developed internally by China to handle.

In fact, the inherent objectives of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** itself were diametrically opposed to adapting to such economic mutations. One example, so glaringly obvious that it cannot be overstated, is: under the Chinese environment of the registration of households and homogenization of the populace (编户齐民), how could Chinese merchants procure reliable financial services *(especially insurance services)*? From the perspectives of technology and capital, the risk-resistance capacity of Chinese merchants in trade could not fundamentally be mentioned in the same breath as that of contemporary Muslims. It is factually correct that Chinese nautical technologies developed; yet even so, not even the most fanatical nationalist would dare assert that there were more Chinese vessels than Arab and Persian ones in the East Asian maritime zones during the Tang Dynasty (唐代). In short, the Chinese found it exceedingly difficult to seize trade dominance even right on their own doorstep.

By the Song Dynasty, industry and commerce had developed substantially, and the emergence of new technologies such as joint-stock (股份制) systems assisted the Chinese in reversing their decline in maritime trade. However, the problem lay in the fact that the increasingly complex industrial-commercial system and market were predestined to surpass the management capacity of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***. In a word, the economic level of the ***High and Late Middle Ages*** necessitated the corresponding social organization and political capacity of the ***High and Late Middle Ages***.

From the Sui (隋) and Tang dynasties to the early Ming Dynasty (明朝初年), the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** had already operated in China for nearly eight centuries. It was impossible for the imperial government to possess the capacity—especially the ***infrastructural power***—to manage the socio-economic level of the 14th century. Consequently, the factual reality we observe is that, whether during the Song Dynasty or the subsequent Yuan Dynasty, some form of tax farming (包税制) universally emerged in China. Distinct from Europe's temporary employment of tax farming during its transition to the ***modern era*** to compensate for deficiencies in state capacity, China's indigenous political system fundamentally could not evolve within a few centuries to a degree sufficient to handle societal development.

Under these circumstances, the reactionary regression of the Ming Dynasty was utterly inevitable; without Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋), a "Ma Yuanzhang" would have emerged regardless. Only during the period when Western influence was sufficiently intense but had not yet triggered direct intervention, was the Chinese empire capable of utilizing certain factors introduced from Europe to limitedly augment its state capacity, swelling into a massive empire—namely, the Qing Dynasty (清朝)—on the eve of having its gates blown open by ironclads and artillery. As stated previously, Iran

and India identically underwent this process; it is merely that they were geographically closer to Europe, thus this phase manifested earlier than in China.

In reality, anyone who meticulously observes the mutations occurring within the Chinese empire during Zhu Yuanzhang's reign will absolutely not doubt that the "supreme directive" (最高指示) of the Ming rulers for this nation was: **To strike at and isolate those factors that had become too complex and vibrant for the government to manage.** Exactly to which precise period this explicit state policy was continuously executed, I find difficult to specify accurately, but it persisted at least for over half of the Ming Dynasty, until it began to loosen in the 16th century.

The domain most profoundly impacted by this policy shift was commerce, particularly foreign trade. The Ming Empire commenced large-scale maritime prohibitions (海禁), concurrently allowing eunuchs (宦官) to occupy a phenomenally critical role in the management of China's foreign trade. This was identically inevitable. As previously mentioned, from the perspective of functional classification, eunuchs belong to highly specialized bureaucrats responsible for extracting and safeguarding the interests of the despotic monarch. Under the macro-background of the Ming Empire increasingly politicizing overseas trade *(via the tributary system [朝贡体系])*, eunuchs would inevitably inject the predatory nature of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** into international trade that inherently ought to pursue mutually beneficial outcomes. This inflicted a devastating impact on China's foreign exchanges in an increasingly globalized world. *(However, by this chronological point, it fundamentally did not matter anymore; the nation was doomed regardless, and a dead entity cannot become any more dead).*

Therefore, the so-called Song-Ming Transition (宋明之变) is merely the synthesized manifestation of two overarching tendencies characterizing the entire society and its rulers: **First, the vigorous ambition to further augment *despotic power*; second, the contraction generated by backward *infrastructural power* when confronted with governance failure.**

Consequently, two explicit characteristics inevitably emerged in terms of policy: **First, the further banditization (土匪化) of the state apparatus.** Since there were fundamentally no effective methods for long-term governance anyway, the primary consideration for both the entire bureaucratic system and the specific emperors and officials was to ruthlessly rob the populace and merchants a few times and then abscond; this mentality actually closely approximated that of nomadic regimes (游牧政权).

Second, the militarization of the open frontiers. The imperial court lacked the capacity to manage a complex society, yet feared that the merchants and fishermen active along the frontiers—especially the maritime frontiers—would metastasize into uncontrollable forces. Therefore, it was structurally compelled to adopt increasingly draconian militarized measures to enforce a *de facto*

isolation of the country (锁国), utilizing martial force to suppress all social activities, even those entirely reasonable and legitimate. Because in the eyes of the imperial court, it alone was the sole heavenly principle (天理).

Viewed from this perspective, the so-called Song-Ming Transition was fundamentally the inevitable consequence of the internal evolution of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic system***; Zhu Yuanzhang merely happened to appear at that specific historical juncture. As I frequently emphasize, Zhu Yuanzhang was undeniably a tyrant steeped in heinous crimes; yet who was it that drove him to utter desperation during his youth and provided him with the stage for his perverse atrocities?

Were not the raging floods and incessant catastrophes devastating the Yellow and Huai river basins (黄淮流域) precisely the direct consequence of the ***bureaucratic state*** forcing the Yellow River (黄河) to flow southward continuously in order to connect the north and south via the Grand Canal (京杭大运河)? "Three diversions of the Yellow River" (三易回河)—was it not the Song Dynasty that induced artificial breaches causing the Yellow River to flow southward? Was it not the Yuan Dynasty that weaponized the southward flow of the Yellow River to construct the Grand Canal? Zhu Yuanzhang was undeniably a prime instigator of a series of monumental catastrophes for the Chinese ***restoration-bureaucratic state***; however, he himself was simultaneously a victim of the countless catastrophes suffered by Chinese society.

The **fifth issue** concerns the positioning and nomenclature of historical phenomena. Regarding this issue, my friends and I have reached unprecedented consensus.

In our nation, strictly following the Bolshevik (布尔什维克) tradition, all violent resistance movements undertaken by the populace against the government in Chinese history can be termed "uprisings" (起义 / literally: righteous uprisings), regardless of whether the insurgents successfully established a new dynasty. There is fundamentally nothing wrong with this in itself; regardless of the circumstances, ordinary citizens taking up arms when driven to an absolute impasse invariably possesses an inherent, natural righteousness.

The problem lies in the fact that in China, when it is necessary to translate violent popular movements that occurred in foreign history, they are identically and indiscriminately referred to as "uprisings"—particularly regarding Europe and Japan since the ***Middle Ages***. This is inevitably exceedingly anachronistic and profoundly deceptive. Foreign uprisings, especially popular uprisings in **feudal Europe** (封建欧洲) and Japan, were frequently a form of resistance against the government by the populace that possessed explicit political demands, and even a certain degree of organization and discipline, attempting to achieve their objectives through the display and exercise of violence.

Conversely, Chinese uprisings—particularly the uprisings during the terminal years of a dynasty—were products of the total collapse of social production; they were behavioral acts of survival sought through violent means by people entirely devoid of any alternative path to remain alive. These two distinct political phenomena fundamentally cannot be encapsulated by a single term in any conceivable sense; this is utterly absurd.

Originally, the **dynastic cycle** (王朝周期律) was a catastrophe entirely unique to China under the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度); one has fundamentally never heard of normally **feudalized** (正常封建化) regimes usually achieving dynastic transitions exclusively through uprisings. However, I personally have not yet determined what Chinese vocabulary ought to be utilized to distinguish between the disparate popular resistance movements in Chinese and foreign history.

Actually, I believe that for the popular resistance movements in European ***feudal society*** (封建社会), we can entirely borrow the Japanese terminology directly—namely, referring to them as *Ikki* (一揆). This was originally a Chinese word, but in feudal Japan, it was endowed with the specific connotation of uniting to resist; employing it for Europe, which identically feudalized normally, is naturally appropriate. But how should China's drastic civil mutinies be designated? I maintain that the term "uprising" (起义) is indeed ultimately inaccurate. After all, when social production has utterly collapsed, it is truly effortless for ordinary people to degenerate into beasts desperately seeking survival regardless of the cost; exactly how many individuals still paid heed to "righteousness" (义) is genuinely questionable. The history of China is indeed so suffocatingly heavy that it is exceedingly difficult for people to locate precise vocabulary to describe it, alas!

The **sixth issue** is strictly speaking not a single question, but a series of perspectives regarding China's Ming (明) and Qing (清) eras.

Readers can presumably discern that I personally harbor a profound distaste for Ming-Qing history. This is not merely because I believe these several centuries indeed constituted historical "garbage time" (垃圾时间) for the Chinese of that era—becoming increasingly oppressive and deviating further and further from the trajectory of civilization and normal human development. It is even more because, for the people currently still living on the Chinese mainland, the Ming and Qing empires fundamentally do not count as "history." **It is not a concluded story, but merely an early iteration of what is transpiring right now.**

Consequently, for me, reading Ming-Qing history is an agonizingly torturous task. I merely need to simply exist in reality to grasp roughly what the Ming and Qing empires looked like, yet I am

forced to confirm, time and time again, through that deliberately mystifying Classical Chinese (故弄玄虚的文言文) *(I call it deliberately mystifying because vernacular Chinese [白话文] in Ming-Qing China was already phenomenally mature)* exactly how many times the events of today have already transpired in the past.

However, foreign scholars find this exceedingly difficult to comprehend. I only discovered quite late that these Western Sinologists (西方汉学家) actually, and rather naively *(naturally, not everyone thinks this way, but judging from the information I acquire domestically, a considerable number indeed do)*, believe that the historical divergence between China and the West formed merely within the last 500 years.

This specific matter sufficiently illustrates how the varying perspectives occupied by different individuals can generate colossal disparities in their views on the exact same issue: The Japanese embarked upon a historical trajectory diametrically distinct from China during the Tang (唐) and Song (宋) periods, hence Japanese scholars perpetually incline toward positing that a decisive mutation occurred in China from the Tang to the Song. Europeans only "discovered" China during the Ming and Qing periods, hence Western scholars are correspondingly prone to believing that China only decisively diverged from Europe during the Ming and Qing periods.

I will not overly satirize the preceding generations of foreign scholars here, because living in China myself, I can entirely comprehend the sheer magnitude of the information barriers and deliberate deceptions they encountered while researching China. I will elaborate on the difficulties of mutual understanding between different nations in the next chapter.

What I wish to articulate here is that, although the overall macroscopic grasp of the Ming-Qing era by foreign scholars can only be described as mediocre, thanks to their naivete and outstanding academic proficiency, the history of Ming-Qing China has been researched rather lucidly from an empirical standpoint. This means that although these scholars are fundamentally unaware that they are studying an elephant, they have already developed a profound understanding of the appearances and structures of the elephant's disparate parts—such as its ears, tail, and tusks. It is merely that they are utterly clueless regarding what functions these respective parts perform on the elephant and what interconnectivity exists among them. Certain discoveries, from my perspective, remain quite valuable in assisting people to comprehend the recent evolution of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家). I will enumerate three examples here.

The **first** reality, currently broadly acknowledged by domestic and foreign scholars and one I have mentioned repeatedly, is that land property rights in Ming (明) and Qing (清) China were exceptionally dispersed. The political and economic influence *(let alone dominant role)* of massive estate owners was fundamentally insufficient to be compared with that of genuine **feudal states** (封

建国家)—whether the most advanced Britain or the relatively backward Poland. This ostensible reality powerfully refutes the persistent propaganda maintained by the government: that the evil ***feudal landlord class*** (封建地主阶级) constituted the greatest obstacle to early modernization. Because when confronting the **bureaucratic system** (官僚体制), they differed not in the slightest from ordinary citizens; they were identically victims. The ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) dreaded the ***landlord class*** transforming into ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) and subjected them to relentless, unceasing suppression. Even if Chinese landlords desired to execute effective investments, what exactly could they do? The *de facto* reality was that they could do absolutely nothing.

The **second** fascinating phenomenon was the mutation of social mores in the Jiangnan region (江南地区) during the late Ming Dynasty, centered around Songjiang Prefecture (松江府). I have forgotten the original source of this material, though I likely encountered it in Mr. Frederic Wakeman's (魏斐德) *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (《洪业：清代开国史》).

Briefly stated, the prominent families in the Songjiang area during the late Ming prioritized the birth of daughters over sons. This likely exerted a certain influence on broader social mores; for instance, the aesthetic preferences of the literati (士人) increasingly feminized. This phenomenon was even observed and documented by European merchants and missionaries who had recently arrived in China. However, this fundamentally did not signify an increase in female rights or an elevation in their status. In reality, women were further degraded within this mutation, increasingly perceived as "objects" appended to patriarchal lineages.

This mutation reflected the pathological development of social concepts under the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会), where social status, power, and wealth had become inextricably bound to official rank. Even for affluent merchant and landlord families, due to genetic uncertainty and environmental instability, no clan patriarch could guarantee that the male members of his lineage would definitively achieve success in the imperial examinations (科举). Yet, provided the clan possessed a sufficient quantity of marriageable daughters, they could perpetually be utilized as instruments of political alliance, betrothed to successful examination candidates. The reason I state there must be a *sufficient quantity* of marriageable daughters is that it was impossible to accurately predict who would become a Jinshi (进士). Therefore, families occasionally had to emulate Lü Buwei (吕不韦)—wagering on a rare commodity to hoard for profit—by identifying several potential candidates in advance and locking in marriage agreements.

Consequently, a reciprocal relationship was forged between the newly minted bureaucrat and his wife's clan: Anyone who has lived in China for any duration will not doubt that to secure promotions and amass colossal fortunes, one must be willing to expend minor fortunes to lubricate various relationships. An official just embarking on his career might lack such financial resources, rendering the support of his wife's clan absolutely critical. Once the former Jinshi had secured an elevated position within the bureaucratic system, he would weaponize his official authority and various unwritten rules (潜规则) to reciprocate his wife's lineage.

What role did the woman play in this process? She played essentially no role that manifested human characteristics whatsoever; she merely functioned as an instrument of reproduction and a token of political alliance. Such highly pathological social behavior sufficiently illustrates that by the late Ming, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** had completely annihilated all characteristics of the **feudal system** (封建体制); even the imperative of "establishing a stable patriarchal family" was actively challenged. Therefore, when the tottering Ming Empire finally remembered it ought to unleash certain ***feudal characteristics*** to deceive the populace into defending the imperial throne, those possessing the capacity to respond were unwilling to rescue the emperor, while those willing to assist entirely lacked the capacity. This predicament was undeniably brought entirely upon themselves.

The **third** phenomenon involves the issue of "involution" (内卷): precisely why the Ming and Qing empires appeared to possess a highly developed ***commodity economy*** (商品经济), yet failed to generate sufficient modern factors. I maintain that the answer to this question constitutes one of the finest achievements produced by foreign scholars in Chinese studies. Namely, the ***commodity economy*** of the Ming and Qing empires was largely not profit-oriented, let alone engineered for any form of capital accumulation. Rather, subsequent to the progressive monetization of Chinese taxation beginning in the late Ming, it was an act of absolute desperation undertaken by destitute peasants to cope with the myriad taxes, corvée labor, and arbitrary levies imposed by the bureaucratic government.

Rather than reflecting the affluence of the nation, the ***commodity economy*** of Ming-Qing China reflected its extreme destitution and the draconian severity of government extortion. During ***Late Imperial China*** (中华帝国晚期), commoners cultivated cash crops like gamblers. Concurrently, China, despite functioning as an astronomically massive segment of the global market at the time, could merely absorb foreign influences passively. If they won the gamble, debts could be repaid and taxes could be met; if they lost the gamble, it was the absolute end, and there was no need to consider what tomorrow might bring.

The reason I believe this phenomenon warrants attention is that, clearly, such anomalous manifestations under conditions of extreme backwardness did not emerge exclusively in China. For instance, while reading Burton Stein's (伯顿斯坦) *A History of India* (《印度文明史》), I

discovered that scholars researching India had long noticed a parallel phenomenon in the Bengal (孟加拉地区) region. Around the period when the East India Company (东印度公司) conquered Bengal, wage labor was phenomenally pervasive throughout the entire region, virtually encompassing every single household. Identical to China, the flourishing of wage labor on the eve of India's ***modern era*** (近代) fundamentally did not indicate how advanced the region was; it was solely because the Indian populace was equally overwhelmingly destitute—if they did not become wage laborers, they possessed not a singular path to survival.

I contend that such phenomena genuinely ought to command the attention of Western scholars. The social development of their own nations proceeded far too smoothly; what Europeans term major historical setbacks do not even qualify as detours here. Consequently, Western scholars are constantly prone to unthinkingly deploying certain characteristics of European modernization to execute rigid criteria application without regarding evolving circumstances (刻舟求剑) across the globe. This approach is not only detrimental to the Western world's comprehension of the non-Western world, but identically obstructs the Western world from comprehending exactly why it succeeded itself.

Apart from these six issues enumerated according to the chronological sequence of historical realities, we ought perhaps to additionally focus on the research conducted by Western scholars—particularly American scholars—regarding the economic history of ancient China. Once certain conspicuous yet profoundly crucial observations are juxtaposed against the economic history of pre-industrial Europe, China's exceptionality following the termination of its ***feudalization*** (封建化) wave becomes glaringly apparent.

Although numerous queries regarding ancient China's economy remain temporarily inconclusive, I remain adamantly convinced that the paradigm of the **"*restoration of the bureaucratic system*"** (官僚制度复辟) can consistently achieve efficacy in explaining all the unique problems China has faced since the 7th century. Here, I will cite a phenomenally renowned historical reality, one that is simultaneously the easiest for observers to notice: Prior to the Industrial Revolution (工业革命), Europe *(primarily considering Western Europe)* never behaved like China, recurrently accelerating to the maximum carrying capacity of its environmental population, only to suffer precipitous plummeting amid catastrophic cataclysms.

From the perspective of Chinese individuals, a nation like France (法国) is simply incomprehensible. I no longer know how many times I have heard people assert that France could easily sustain two or three times its current population, yet today it merely hovers around 70 million. This is not strictly a contemporary issue. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, France possessed massive surpluses in grain production, yet its demographic curve—at least relative to our nation's—remained remarkably stable.

This issue effortlessly entangles several other realities. For instance, ancient China was an exceedingly rare locale globally where pastoralism (牧业) and agriculture (农业) were highly segregated geographically. Let alone comparing it with regions like Europe characterized by a highly mixed agriculture-pastoralism system, it is said that even in India or Japan, the demarcation between agricultural and pastoral lands was never this rigidly distinct. Six years ago, when I first played the game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (《天国拯救》) developed by Warhorse Studios of the Czech Republic, I noticed this exact phenomenon: in ***medieval*** Europe, agricultural lands and pastoral lands exhibited a highly interlaced distribution.

However, in China, based on my observations during travels and excursions, within ***China Proper*** (汉地 / ***Handi***), agricultural land undoubtedly occupies an overwhelming absolute majority relative to pastoral land. The Chinese precipitously converted every conceivable inch of arable land exclusively into farmland. Only on slopes where utilization was genuinely arduous would a minuscule number of herdsmen graze modest flocks of sheep, rarely exceeding a hundred head. As for cattle and horse herds, semi-wild grazing fundamentally did not exist in the interior (内地). The imperial court would attempt to breed sufficient livestock when particularly required, but the civil populace fundamentally did not operate with such considerations.

It is worth noting that this macro-spatial segregation of agricultural and pastoral lands in China was patently not the case since antiquity. During Qin-Han (秦汉) China, right in the period of the ***classical empire*** (古典帝国), even ***Handi*** (汉地) existed in a state of mixed agriculture and pastoralism. During the four centuries from the 3rd to the 6th century, because massive populations of ethnic minorities whose primary **mode of production** (生产方式) was originally nomadic pastoralism (游牧) entered Northern China, mixed agriculture-pastoralism was identically the norm, at least in Northern China.

The critical mutation that resulted in China's agriculture and pastoralism assuming their current segregated state occurred precisely during the Tang (唐) and Song (宋) periods. Chronologically, this perfectly coincides with the restoration of the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家); therefore, I contend there absolutely must exist an intrinsic correlation between the two. Furthermore, we must note that pastoralism was not the only sector segregated from agriculture; forestry (林业) constitutes an identical paradigm. However, people might doubt whether the Ming (明) and Qing (清) Chinese empires even possessed any respectable forestry to begin with—because by the late Qing Dynasty, Northern China had been rendered virtually utterly barren.

My perspective is that it was precisely the colossal pressure exerted upon Chinese society by the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** that coerced Chinese peasants into adopting an exclusively singular agricultural production model, rendering it fundamentally impossible for them to select a composite operational model like the Europeans.

The factual reality is that in China, let alone ordinary peasant households, even the most numerous medium and small landlords could hardly be considered genuinely "managing" (经营) land for profit; what they achieved was merely barely subsisting. Because the systemic, implicit extortion perpetrated by the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** against Chinese society was truly too draconian, even if you managed it impeccably, nine times out of ten, your profits would plummet straight into the pockets of bureaucrats great and small.

Generally speaking, compared to production modes like pastoralism or forestry, agriculture yields the absolute highest output per unit of land area *(capable of sustaining the maximum population)*. In order to cope maximally with myriad arbitrary levies and quotas, every individual was forcibly compelled to dedicate every single inch of land to agricultural production. Moreover, logically, pastoralism and forestry constitute medium-to-long-term asset management, making them more resilient against direct tax extraction; this directly accelerated the elimination of both sectors within a China under bureaucratic restoration.

Naturally, operating in this manner generated a cascade of consequences, which subsequently mutate into myriad "historical problems" in the eyes of contemporaries. For instance, regarding China's unique demographic curve: ***Handi***, adopting a highly singular agricultural production model, indeed succeeded in squeezing the carrying capacity of the land to its absolute ceiling during the pre-industrial era. However, abandoning a composite production mode inevitably signified larger-scale, more violent ecological destruction. Once an unpredictable natural disaster struck, the entire society possessed virtually zero resilience. This mode of production drastically amplified the catastrophes brought about by societal collapse during the terminal phase of every dynasty, thereby to a certain extent "accomplishing" our nation's horrifying historical demographic curve.

For another example, the fact of the chronic deterioration of horse administration (马政败坏) in China since the Tang Dynasty was identically the inevitable consequence triggered by the nationwide mutation in the production model under the oppression of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***. When China's interior practically possessed zero pastoral zones available for semi-wild grazing, from exactly where was the imperial court supposed to procure superior breeds of horses?

In stark contrast to China, within Western Europe—the most quintessential paradigm of the **feudal system** (封建制度)—politics propelled the composite operational model (复合式的经营). Western Europe was ruled by tens of thousands of ***feudal lords*** (封建领主) of varying magnitudes and their subordinate **knights** (骑士). For the **military aristocracy** (封建军事贵族), whether in Europe or Japan, horses were absolutely paramount. Let alone the irreplaceable role cavalry played in military

operations prior to the 20th century, the horse and its associated equestrian equipment inherently constituted a symbol of feudal hierarchy.

Driven by this necessity, even if superior breeds could be procured externally, every ***feudal lord*** ultimately required the provision of a conducive living environment for horses within his own domain. Although hunting was less critical relative to horse breeding, it identically constituted an exceptionally vital social activity and ritual during the ***feudal period*** (封建时期), yielding considerable economic value. Therefore, under such an environment, the interlaced distribution of agricultural, pastoral, and forestry lands is not surprising in the slightest.

Yet, the ***feudal lord*** as a ruling class fundamentally did not exist within the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家); consequently, the aforementioned demands generated by political factors were even more impossible to emerge. Beyond this, the prolonged existence of the feudal system not only subjected Europeans to societal pressures astronomically lower than those in China, but simultaneously generated astonishing disparities in ***social consciousness*** (社会意识), customs, and jurisprudence.

Take the previously mentioned issue of inheritance law, for instance. In regions where ***feudalization*** (封建化) had progressed to a relatively high degree, the right to property inheritance would mutate from division toward concentration *(i.e., **primogeniture** [长子继承制])*. *De facto*, this constrained the excessive fragmentation of land, thereby furnishing the possibility for a composite operational model; after all, if land is sliced too minutely, it genuinely becomes detrimental to executing composite operations.

Compared to the draconian circumstances in China, the overarching social environment of feudal Europe genuinely encouraged individuals to pursue commercial profits; apart from grain crops, raising sheep and cultivating grapes and olives were all highly lucrative. Therefore, in the eyes of the Chinese, Europe fundamentally never reached its requisite maximum population carrying capacity. Yet, it was precisely this gentle demographic curve that guaranteed the steady growth of ***labor productivity*** (劳动生产率). I maintain that this is identically the profound significance of the feudal revolution for humanity: **Without a complete *Middle Ages*, modernization fundamentally does not exist.**

Even though I personally have clearly recognized that Karl Marx (马克思) and Friedrich Engels (恩格斯) committed numerous colossal errors, their profound realization that politics and economics are inextricably linked *(although political economy emerged even earlier)* undeniably constitutes a genuine insight. At least from my perspective, if we need to research the economic problems within Chinese history, it is fundamentally impossible to bypass the unique political system of ancient

China—namely, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). If people researching the economic history of other regions globally could pick up the mirror of China and scrutinize it carefully, those intractable enigmas that have plagued scholars for years might very well be resolved instantaneously.

The above encapsulates the content I believe still requires supplementation regarding Chinese history. Naturally, there is a massive amount more that could be discussed, but constrained by the necessity to control the manuscript's length, I shall refrain from elaborating further. I maintain there is one immutable reality that must be etched into memory: **Since the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) dynasties right up to the present day, every seemingly utterly incomprehensible phenomenon occurring in China is, without a single exception, the precise reflection of the *restoration-bureaucratic system*'s influence across all societal dimensions.**

It is exceedingly ill-advised to attribute the causes to unfalsifiable "national characteristics" (民族性) or "regionality" (区域性); such explanations merely serve to camouflage the more fundamental historical realities. It is exactly like how far too many people today, observing the mutations of the Qing Dynasty (清朝) relative to the Ming Dynasty (明朝), assume it was the traits of the Manchus (满洲人) or the characteristics of the Manchu-Mongol alliance (满蒙联盟) that played the decisive role. However, the influence of these ethnic minorities merely rendered the emergence of these mutations more natural.

If a Han Chinese (汉族) dynasty had continued to rule China after the Ming Dynasty, it is highly probable it would identically have developed a parallel "Eight Banners system" (八旗制度) by observing the so-called successes and failures of the Ming Dynasty; it is merely that the characteristics of the Manchus as an ethnic minority that **"*Entered the Pass*"** (入关) clearly facilitated a more frictionless genesis and evolution of the Eight Banners system. This hypothetical Han regime would highly probably still have outperformed the Ming Dynasty in external military and fiscal manifestations. This is because whether considering the Ottomans (奥斯曼), Persia (波斯), or India (印度), massive empires of this precise nature invariably emerged during the historical epoch when Western influence was pronounced yet direct intervention was impossible. It was merely that the Qing Dynasty's Manchu-Mongol alliance inclined this specific regime more toward expanding into Inner Asia (亚洲内陆).

I possess a sufficiently profound understanding of China's history, have viscerally experienced China's current societal reality over these years, and have witnessed such glaring contrasts through observing the histories of other global regions. Therefore, although the preceding discourse might sound exceptionally dogmatic, I possess absolute confidence in asserting its validity. If this

manuscript can see the light of day in the future, I hope that those who read it will boldly challenge and scientifically verify these theses.

29, The Crucial Position of Feudal Society in the Developmental Process of Human History

Thus far, we have completed our brief examination of the developmental trajectory of human society.

Beginning in 1500 AD, the relatively independent historical developmental processes across various global regions concluded. Western nations, which were the first to march toward ***early modern and modern civilization*** (近现代文明), began exerting an increasingly intense influence upon non-Western nations. Consequently, attempting to distinctly categorize the nature of a specific regime—as was possible prior to the Age of Discovery (地理大发现)—becomes exceedingly difficult. However, readers reaching this point will not find it difficult to discern that what Europeans term the "***Middle Ages***" (中世纪)—namely, the historical epoch in which ***feudal society*** (封建社会) existed—is genuinely the bifurcation point determining the destiny of a nation and a people.

The modern civilization created by the Western world today is founded precisely upon the series of ideologies, cultures, concepts, organizations, and institutions generated throughout the entire process of ***feudal society*** from its inception to its conclusion. The dark ages during the initial phase of ***feudalization*** (封建化) were not genuine darkness, but rather the necessary preparations executed for societal reconstruction; the adage "there can be no construction without destruction" (“不破不立”) encapsulates precisely this meaning.

Several millennia had elapsed from the genesis of human civilization to the establishment of the world's first **feudal regime** (封建政权). When the ***feudal economic system*** (封建经济制度) emerged upon a piece of land, the civilization there had already weathered thousands of years of time. People had created religions, constructed city-states, formed countries, organized governments, and possessed armies. Humanity pioneered eras of prosperity; from the perspective of the empire's inhabitants, any land characterized by lofty crowns and broad belts (峨冠博带 / *representing civilized elites*) was bathed in the radiance of classical civilization (古典文明).

Yet, it was precisely beneath those magnificent monuments and amid that blinding radiance that every single human individual appeared profoundly more minuscule. Exactly when human beings were contented with the augmentation of their capacity to comprehend and alter nature, they found it exceedingly difficult to realize that they had simultaneously acquired another capacity: the capacity for self-destruction. The astonishing bureaucratic system (官僚体制) lorded over every

subject of the empire brimming with contempt; day after day, it devoured the wealth created by society, yet generated increasingly shriveling value.

Feudalization constituted the turning point of human history. Prior to its occurrence, the regimes ruling the inhabitants of every civilized world were perpetually becoming increasingly colossal and labyrinthine, while the ***community*** (社群 / 共同体) intimately sharing the joys and sorrows of the individual was continuously shrinking—from tribes (部落), to large extended families, down to minuscule nuclear families. The consequences are blindingly obvious if this trend, which inevitably leads to the neglect of individual freedom and rights, were to continue; we have already witnessed this exact consequence in China.

Yet the sheer serendipity of history lies in the fact that when the ***productive forces*** (生产力) developed to a certain threshold, small-scale production and the ***natural economy*** (自然经济) could become the absolute mainstream relying upon their efficiency advantages. Consequently, all the massive empires crumbled into dust under the devastating blow of the feudal economy. Human society genuinely gained the possibility of marching toward modern civilization because, during the societal reconstruction subsequent to ***feudalization***, the ***communities*** surrounding every individual did not continue to shrink alongside the augmentation of state power—in fact, it was physically impossible for them to shrink any further. Instead, they were now growing in tandem.

It was only at this precise juncture that people acquired sufficient strength capable of defending the knowledge they had learned throughout the long ***Middle Ages***—knowledge utterly unheard of and inconceivable to their predecessors—and, most crucially, human dignity and value.

Recalling the distinction between the two social transitions of the ***classical period*** (古典时代) and the ***early modern period*** (近世) naturally enables one to comprehend the profound significance of ***feudalization***. When the ***despotic power*** (专制权力) of monarchs augmented during the ***classical period*** (古典时期), people were virtually helpless against it; however, when the monarchs of ***early modern absolutist states*** (绝对主义国家) attempted to declare *"L'État, c'est moi"* (“朕即国家” / *I am the state*), the Scientific Revolution (科学革命) and the Enlightenment (思想启蒙) were already simultaneously underway.

Although it is deeply regrettable that my motherland did not undergo these processes, I have heard such extraordinary sagas from those nations that won their revolutions along the way; it is undeniably a hymn to human courage.

This is identically why I am rather reluctant to discuss the history subsequent to the conclusion of the ***Middle Ages***. Not merely because the saga of the modern and contemporary eras is genuinely too distant for the Chinese people, but also because it is exceedingly difficult to discern their decisive role regarding the developmental process of human history.

Reflect upon this, my friends: according to the methodology and conclusions we have deduced all the way to this point, has this world undergone any quintessential mutations from 700 years ago to the present day? No. The factual reality is that if we examine the various regimes existing in the world in 1325, we practically already know exactly what position their development occupies in the world today.

England was the region where the **feudal system** (封建制度) was most developed; by 1325, it conspicuously occupied the foremost vanguard globally in the ***feudalization*** (封建化) process, already poised to depart from ***feudal society*** (封建社会). France could be deemed the cradle of the **feudal system**, occupying a position strictly second only to England in the ***feudalization*** process. The various regimes of Western and Central Europe did not advance as rapidly as England and France, yet the **feudal system** had identically been firmly established. Northern Europe caught the final train of ***feudalization***. The ***feudalization*** of Eastern Europe was inevitably subjected to the impact of myriad interfering factors.

Byzantium (拜占庭) was merely lingering in its death throes, while ***the Near East*** (近东), which had once served as the epicenter of civilization, had irrecoverably missed the temporal window for ***feudalization***. Iran was groaning beneath the iron hooves of conquerors, and this was merely a prologue. India had indeed **feudalized** to a certain extent, but the factors obstructing its ***feudalization*** process had all manifested, and none could be resolved in the short term. Ethiopia and China's Tibet had identically commenced ***feudalization***, but their impoverished ***productive forces*** (生产力) rendered it phenomenally difficult for wealth to be effectively utilized for investment at scale.

China had long since embarked upon a dead end, and was furthermore hurtling down it at an accelerating pace.

Although Japan's ***feudalization*** process lagged behind Europe's, it had already forged an unstoppable momentum. The **feudal system** of the Indochinese Peninsula was in the midst of formation, yet the difficulties encountered by India would identically be encountered here. Moreover, ***feudalization*** commenced far too late across the vast majority of the Indochinese Peninsula; its natural evolution would shortly be violently interrupted by Western influence. The Koreans erroneously adopted the institutions of the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) during the ***classical period*** (古典时代), and they were imminently about to pay the ultimate

price for this. Although Vietnam achieved independence from China, it identically inherited the toxic baggage of the Tang Empire, rendering it exceedingly difficult to embark again upon a normal path of ***feudalization***.

Maritime Southeast Asia (海洋东南亚) was still too backward; the **feudal system** was as yet fundamentally untraceable here. West Africa, benefiting from the trans-Saharan trade, surprisingly manifested the facade of a ***classical society*** (古典社会); however, even if this was not an ephemeral mirage, chronologically speaking, it was already fatally late. The East African coast identically could not even touch the periphery of ***feudalization***.

Upon the expansive steppes of the Eurasian continent, nomadic regimes fundamentally lacked any conditions to actualize ***feudalization***. As for the New World, although it remained isolated from the Old World, considering Europe's progressively sophisticated nautical technologies alongside the transformative mutations emerging in the ***Late Middle Ages***, what rationale is there to believe that the monumental enterprise of connecting the world together would not commence from Europe?

I maintain that this is a phenomenally astonishing reality: in truth, over the past 700 years, the positional shifts of the various regions of the Old World within the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列) of development have been exceedingly limited.

If we rewind another 700 years from 1325, then attempting to accurately predict the global situation of 1325 AD from the circumstances of 625 AD would not be so effortless; numerous paramount pieces of information had, after all, not yet manifested. If we rewind yet another 700 years from 625 AD, we would find it virtually impossible to deduce roughly what state the various nations of the world were in during 625 BC *[sic; logically referring to 625 AD being predicted from 76 BC]* based on the circumstances of 76 BC.

I contend that, quintessentially, there have been merely two processes thus far that triggered colossal mutations in the epicenter of human civilization, thereby precipitating the permutation of the rankings *(from advanced to backward)* among various regions within the historical process. The first was ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) prior to the genesis of ***classical empires***; the second was precisely ***feudalization*** following the collapse of ***classical empires***. The Age of Discovery (地理大发现) was merely the victors of the feudal revolution savoring the fruits of their triumph.

In a word, provided we perceive the prior historical trajectory of a colony—which inherited the social developmental stage of its mother country—as identical to that of its mother country, then the success or failure of ***feudalization*** possesses decisive significance in the history of any region up to the present day. Consequently, I phenomenally endorse the formulation of the "***Middle Ages***"; it is arguably the most profoundly insightful nomenclature I know across all human academic

disciplines. The feudal ***Middle Ages*** undeniably occupy the absolute central position within the entirety of human history.

30, On the Usage and Definition of Concepts

As we conclude this massive, hundred-thousand-word chapter, it is inevitable that I have introduced original concepts, some of which may push the boundaries of conventional terminology. Therefore, I establish here the precise definitional criteria I apply to historical nomenclature, offering them to the reader for reference and rigorous critique.

Class vs. Stratum (阶级与阶层**):** Although the usage of "class" and "*stratum*" has long been conflated, I argue that a fundamental distinction must be maintained. I absolutely reject the notion of categorizing the state apparatus or the bureaucracy as a "class." In my view, the term "class" must denote that its subject is intrinsically linked to a specific *mode of production* (生产方式). That is to say, when a group of people is defined as a class, the defining characteristic of this set is that its "elements" universally adopt a specific mode of production to directly generate *productive forces*. It is precisely because classes participate in labor and production through various means that they can shape human civilization from technological, cultural, artistic, and relational perspectives. This actually echoes the consistent Marxist view that historical development is driven by the movement of various classes. Regarding the theoretical completeness of Marx and Engels' original framework, we need not outright deny it; rather, we should distill its authentic core from historical distortions (去伪存真), making it logically self-consistent and universally applicable.

Unlike a class, the state apparatus or bureaucracy is fundamentally *detached from material production* (脱产的). While one can certainly argue that it occupies a specific position within the *relations of production*, and even fulfills crucial social functions, it is emphatically *not* anchored to any specific mode of production. By drawing this line, we place the bureaucracy in a highly specific, separate position within the narrative of class analysis—a distinction that proves highly advantageous.

Similarly, one can observe that the elements within the set of "intellectuals" do not necessarily share a common mode of production. Therefore, they should be classified as an *intellectual stratum*, not an intellectual class. A salient difference between a class and a *stratum* is that classes emerge and are eliminated along with the evolution of eras—a process fundamentally determined by the birth and obsolescence of modes of production. Conversely, a *stratum* that performs a specific social function can persist for an exceedingly long time, because social functions do not necessarily vanish with the shifts in social formations brought about by class movements. There was a *bureaucratic stratum* and an *intellectual stratum* in the Sumerian period, just as there are in today's world, despite a span of five thousand years.

We must also note that a subset of a *stratum* can highly likely be classified as a class. While the *stratum* as a whole may lack a uniform mode of production, a specific segment of it might not.

Take, for instance, the priests in *early states*. Setting aside their religious and administrative nature, priests—as a segment of intellectuals serving as a labor component—invested their knowledge into agricultural production and engineering construction. They did, indeed, generate *productive forces* through a specific mode of production. Therefore, designating priests as a "priestly class" is largely permissible. This explains why, when discussing the ruling classes of *early states*, priests are usually counted among their ranks.

Finally, I posit that merchants—specifically itinerant traders who are not responsible for producing goods but solely handle the circulation phase—should be viewed as a *stratum* rather than a class. As readers will see in the main text, this categorization is highly instrumental in explaining "*trade-based pseudo-classical states*" (贸易型伪古典国家) and "*late-classical states*." Furthermore, we must point out that while merchants are indispensable for their vital social function, they cannot serve as the primary creators of culture within a large-scale system. Only in societies like the Sogdian city-states—where the demographic scale is relatively small, yet situated on primary trade routes with an immense volume of trade—can commercial culture assume a dominant role.

Feudal economic system (封建经济制度): Refers to an economic system characterized by individual small-scale production as the primary production model, tenancy as the primary operational method, or—to phrase it more left-leaning—as the primary mode of exploitation (the above being the "feudal mode of production"), with pronounced features of a *natural economy*. The basic unit of economic production is generally the manor. The form of land rent undergoes changes with the development of the feudal economy; generally speaking, it transitions from corvée rent to rent in kind and then to money rent. After feudal landlords at various levels achieve political dominance and become *feudal lords*, the *feudal society* should exhibit the characteristic of large-scale landownership, meaning that land, through various forms of annexation, reaches a high level of concentration. Serfdom exists to varying degrees; due to different specific environments, the strength of the peasants' dependence on the lords varies, but in any case, it is weaker than early slavery. The urban economy belonged as an appendage to the manor in the *Early Middle Ages* (中世纪早期), but had already achieved a certain degree of independence in the *High Middle Ages* (中世纪盛期), with obvious development in long-distance commercial activities, monetary economy, and autonomy.

Mainstream Mode of Exploitation (主流剥削方式): Within Soviet-style historiography, class societies and the *mainstream mode of exploitation* dominant within that society possess a phenomenally rigid corresponding relationship. According to the orthodox perspective I was taught during my student years, the *mainstream mode of exploitation* in a *slavery society* (奴隶制社会) is the forcible seizure of surplus labor (剩余劳动) via forced labor; the *mainstream mode of exploitation* in a *feudal society* (封建社会) is the plunder of surplus product (剩余产品) via land rent; and the *mainstream mode of exploitation* in a *capitalist society* is the acquisition of surplus

value (剩余价值) via the wage-labor relationship. However, the definitional chaos within the domain of social sciences in our nation vastly exceeds the imagination of outsiders. Frequently, individuals in China identically categorize the surplus labor acquired through exploitation under slavery, as well as the surplus product acquired under the feudal system, directly as a variant of surplus value, merely imbued with a potent extra-economic (超经济) attribute.

We must concede that the observations of Soviet-style historiography are not entirely devoid of merit; obviously, the *mainstream mode of exploitation* and the taxonomy of a class society unequivocally possess a robust corresponding relationship. Yet the issue resides in the fact that historical realities demonstrate it is exceedingly arduous for people to assume that a society taxonomized as a *feudal society* inevitably features the collection of land rent as its absolute *mainstream mode of exploitation*.

During the *Early and High Middle Ages*, the manorial system (庄园制) under a *natural economy* (自然经济) universally possessed an institutionalized regime of forced labor. For instance, the well-known "3+3+1 model" within *medieval* European feudal agricultural production: serfs bound to the lord's land were compelled to toil uncompensated for the lord for three days; they were required to bring their own primary means of production to the lord's demesne (自营地) to execute uncompensated forced labor. The serfs could then toil for three days upon their holding (份地) , and the grain produced upon this holding sustained the serf's family. Sunday was the Sabbath, during which agricultural labor was strictly prohibited. Beyond this standardized model of exploitation, the corvée (劳役) exacted upon serfs during busy agricultural seasons could be significantly aggravated. Furthermore, fundamentally not all peasants operated on this "three days on, three days off" schedule. Semi-serfs possessing excessively scant land were fundamentally incapable of sustaining the standardized quota of corvée, and could only secure grain by working as hired hands for wealthy peasants or lords. Conversely, freeholders (自由农) were generally exempt from enduring forced corvée, primarily paying rent in kind or in monetary currency.

Although individuals conventionally regard the "corvée rent" (劳役地租) of the *medieval* European manorial system as a specific typology of land rent paid utilizing labor power, this remains fundamentally incapable of camouflaging its intrinsic essence as forced labor. Only upon reaching the *Late Middle Ages* did corvée rent transition on a massive scale into rent in kind or monetary rent; this was identically the historical epoch wherein the *manorial economy* thoroughly disintegrated. Certain momentous historical events, such as the Black Death, accelerated this process.

Observing the history of Japan will yield the identical conclusion. Subsequent to the disintegration of the *manorial economy* in the *Late Middle Ages* (中世晚期) of Japan, rent/taxes unequivocally

became the mode of exploitation occupying an overwhelming majority across the entirety of society. The *Taikō Kenchi* (太阁检地 / Toyotomi Hideyoshi's land surveys) established quintessential rent-based exploitation via the *Kokudaka* system (石高制) and the annual tribute (*nengu* / 年供). It was merely that Japan's *commodity economy* (商品经济) remained insufficient to rival Western Europe, thus the proportion of tax in kind within its land taxation remained higher.

Therefore, if we strictly adhere to Soviet-style historiography—perceiving the epoch where the mode of exploitation corresponding to a class society dominates the entirety of society as its quintessential phase—then this specific phase genuinely would not be excessively protracted. Taking the *feudal period* (封建时期) as an example, after less than two centuries and merely a few generations, alongside the development of urban commerce and industry, wage labor began to play an increasingly pivotal role within the socio-economy; the *feudal society* began to manifest faltering instability, and history transitioned into what people conventionally term the "*early modern era*" (近代).

Consequently, Soviet-style historiography inevitably generates certain sensory contradictions. Regardless of whether viewed by the historiographical community or ordinary citizens, the epoch where the *feudal political system* (封建政治体制) was *de facto* at its most mature and quintessential was precisely the *High Middle Ages* spanning from 1000 AD to 1300 AD. During this epoch, the contractual network predicated upon (cross-generational) land subinfeudation and lord-vassal relationships blanketed the terrain of Western Europe; superior lords relied upon the military service of subordinate lords and acknowledged their right to possess land. The *natural economy* identically retained its dominant positioning, and the manorial system—spawned organically beneath this *natural economy*—functioned flawlessly. The *feudal lord* (领主) resided within the manor, and serfs toiled on the lord's demesne via forced labor. The societal structure was phenomenally, flawlessly theorized into three estates (三个等级): namely, those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. Feudal religious organizations—namely, the Roman Catholic Church—saw their authority crest at its absolute zenith, shouldering a colossal volume of societal functions. These all constitute the quintessential humanistic landscapes of the *feudal system* (or the *Middle Ages*) as conventionally perceived by people.

Conversely, upon reaching the *Late Middle Ages*, standing armies and mercenary forces became ubiquitous;諸侯 (vassals) no longer necessarily served in person, and the feudal military system underwent monumental mutations. The manorial system disintegrated, the *commodity economy* recovered, the *burgher stratum* expanded, and the Reformation was already brewing. Even if the *Late Middle Ages* was still technically a *feudal society*, its humanistic landscape had already mutated profoundly. Yet paradoxically, strictly according to the Soviet-style historiographical perspective of correlating exploitation modes with class societies, it was exactly during the *Late Middle Ages* that the supposedly quintessential *feudal society* finally emerged.

These deficiencies in the interpretive framework of Soviet-style historiography precisely reflect the significance of this manuscript's approach in defining class societies via the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素).

In reality, people can readily discern that even if superficially the phenomenon of slaves within *early states* (早期国家) or *classical empires* (古典帝国) sweating profusely on plantations appears similar to the serfs of the *Early and High Middle Ages* enduring corvée on the lord's demesne—both ostensibly constituting "forced labor"—there exists, after all, a conspicuous distinction: the forced labor within a *feudal society* (封建社会) is predicated upon land attachment relations. Slaves do not possess any means of production whatsoever, nor do they even possess any private property; they struggle to exert control even over their own physical bodies. They themselves are perceived as private property that the master can dispose of arbitrarily (particularly regarding buying and selling). A slave's necessary labor and surplus labor are thoroughly conflated in time and space; the master appropriates virtually the entirety of the slave's output, exclusively allocating an infinitesimally small fraction of livelihood materials to sustain the slave's physical survival.

By contrast, serfs enjoy a certain degree of legal personhood and partially possess means of production—specifically possessing the *usufruct* (用益权) of their holding (份地). Serfs cannot be bought and sold arbitrarily exactly like livestock, nor can they be slaughtered by the *feudal lord* (领主) at will; generally, they can exclusively change masters alongside the transfer of the land. The forced labor exacted upon serfs is identically lucidly severed in time and space. For instance, the fruits of three days of labor on their own holding per week belong to themselves, whilst the fruits of three days of uncompensated labor on the lord's land belong to the lord. The obligations between the serf and the lord are identically not entirely unidirectional; the latter must identically provide judicial services and military protection for the former.

Consequently, we can observe that even if land rent had not yet become the *mainstream mode of exploitation* during the *Early and High Middle Ages*, land had already occupied the absolute core positioning within social production, morphing into the *primary factor of production*. The "feudal attributes" (封建属性) of the society are utterly indisputable; this identically explains exactly why the terminology "corvée rent" (劳役地租) exists. By utilizing the *primary factor of production* to define class societies, historical periodization becomes astronomically more straightforward and lucid, preventing individuals from plunging into conceptual conflation.

Exactly as articulated in Section 5 of Chapter 13 of this manuscript, even regarding the exact same vocabulary, its intrinsic connotations are fundamentally not identical beneath differing societal morphologies. Here, we shall tentatively utilize an illustration predicated upon Marxist interpretations. In a *feudal society*, land rent—whether it be the corvée rent of the early and middle phases or the rent in kind and monetary rent of the late phase—constitutes virtually the absolute

entirety of the society's mode of exploitation. The lord's exploitation of the serf is fundamentally not predicated upon market contracts, but entirely relies upon his political privileges and extra-economic coercive power (超经济的强制力). If the serf fails to pay rent, the lord can deploy his judicial apparatus and military forces to execute suppression.

Within a *capitalist society*, land remains a pivotal means of production, and land rent identically continues to exist. However, the standardized agricultural structure of *capitalism* is "tripartite": the land owner leases the land to the agricultural capitalist, and the agricultural capitalist subsequently hires agricultural workers to toil upon the land. Thus, land rent exclusively becomes a mere fraction of the surplus value; the authentic act of exploitation occurs via the process of the agricultural capitalist paying wages to the hired workers. The agricultural capitalist extracts a specific fraction from the total profit, delivering it to the land owner as rent for utilizing the land. Within a *capitalist society*, land rent possesses absolutely zero extra-economic coercive characteristics. Contemporary landlords fundamentally cannot deploy extrajudicial lynchings to coerce the land lessee into paying rent; their actions must inherently be predicated upon economic contracts, legal property rights, and market norms. Therefore, in the *early modern society* subsequent to the conclusion of the *Middle Ages*, even if the collection of land rent remained the *mainstream mode of exploitation* for a protracted duration, this fundamentally did not impede the *feudal society* from transitioning toward a *capitalist society*, because the intrinsic nature possessed by land rent was undeniably undergoing mutation.

Soviet-style historiography harbors yet another flaw: it frequently and simplistically categorizes the forced labor practices existing within the *manorial economy* as mere "vestiges of slavery" (奴隶制残余), thereby imbuing it with a potently derogatory coloration. However, the factual reality is obviously not that simplistic. Leaving aside the fact that the transition between socio-developmental stages inherently necessitates a protracted duration, the existence of the *manorial economy* identically possesses its positive significance.

This is beyond the fundamental elevation in the status and treatment of the serfs themselves relative to slaves, which we have already discussed. Under the state of a *natural economy* where the *commodity economy* has withered, the manor is not merely an administrative unit, but identically the absolute core of agricultural production. If the lord exclusively collected monetary currency from the peasants, that currency would be phenomenally difficult to spend. If he exclusively collected physical commodities, the lord's entire family would plunge into crisis upon encountering a famine year when the peasants failed to deliver. Under such a state, in order to maintain his physical survival and military logistics, the lord necessitated the direct, manual control over a specific fraction of core land—namely, the so-called demesne.

The organization of production by *resident feudal lords* (在地领主) via forced corvée possessed undeniable positive significance. They provided infrastructure and means of production, executed resource integration, managed production, and simultaneously established order and bore responsibility for security. The direct participation and intervention in the production process by

resident feudal lords and manorial bailiffs (庄园管家)—from which they derived profit—identically stimulated their enthusiasm for agricultural amelioration. The spatial proximity in residence between the rulers and the ruled, coupled with their shared focus upon productive labor, was strictly necessary for the formation of the spirit of feudal contracts. Although the status between the lord and the serf was astronomically unequal, it nevertheless constituted a contractual relationship mutually beneficial to both parties at the time; the lord identically needed to shoulder the obligations of managing, producing within, and protecting the manor. Although the internal judicial practices of the manor safeguarded the feudal hierarchy, they identically crystallized customary law, thereby catalyzing the consciousness of rules within grassroots society.

In summary, although the *manorial economy* possessed the exploitative essence of forced labor, it nevertheless accommodated the abysmally low level of *productive forces* and the chaotic societal reality of that era. It successfully organized the dispersed population, propelled the iteration of agricultural technology, and established a feudal order centered absolutely around contracts and land.

Once the *Late Middle Ages* arrived, the *manorial economy* disintegrated, and rent in kind alongside monetary rent became the *mainstream mode of exploitation*. Paradoxically, the *feudal lords* (封建领主) consequently withdrew from the management of agricultural production, no longer intervened directly, and thus cared significantly less than before. The manor as a unified production unit vanished; what remained now was merely a pure "rent-collection jurisdiction." The lords' withdrawal from production and their transmutation into absentee landlords (不在地主) and court aristocrats portended that the *feudal system* (封建制度) had peaked and was inexorably descending into decline. When the lord withdrew from organizing production and ceased playing the roles of military and judicial protector as well as the provider of the means of production, he identically ceased to be a "legitimate protector and manager" in the eyes of the peasants, and increasingly approximated the role of a parasite.

Soviet-style historiography conventionally harbors a specific predilection: namely, the assumption that "quintessential class societies are protracted and stable, whereas the transitional periods between them are astronomically briefer." Yet the historical truth we observe is fundamentally not like this. The duration for which quintessential class society morphologies (as defined by Soviet-style historiography) exist is decidedly not protracted, virtually never exceeding two centuries, or the timespan of ten generations. Furthermore, even if we incorporate the transitional states between class societies—redefined by this manuscript as the *classical society* (古典社会) and the *early modern society* (近世社会)—as historical stages standing in parallel with the three main class societies, these "standardized societal morphologies" across the *historical sequence* (历史序列) are fundamentally not protracted; rather, the evolutionary processes between them occupy the overwhelming majority of historical epochs. This identically reinforces the perspective of this manuscript once again: societal revolution is undeniably a long-term enterprise.

Specific to China, Soviet-style historical propaganda has been amplified due to China's idiosyncratic historical trajectory. Certain historical narratives are phenomenally radical; for instance, some point out that commencing from the "Initial Tax on Land Acreage" (初税亩) in the State of Lu (鲁国) at the genesis of the sixth century BC, and traversing a series of reform movements across various vassal states during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, China—even during the early phase of its *classical empire*'s unification—was already a nation predominantly featuring a *feudal economic system* (封建经济制度) where land rent constituted the *mainstream mode of exploitation*, and this state persisted relentlessly until the ultimate dynasty, the Qing. However, in reality, sagacious individuals can discern that this narrative is profoundly problematic. The Chinese empire collected the poll tax (人头税) for a protracted duration, which fundamentally constitutes a tax levied upon labor power. Taking the Han Dynasty—a *classical empire*—as an example, the official, fixed land tax was perpetually maintained at an exceedingly low rate, yet the poll tax (known as the *Kou Fu* / 口赋) imposed an astronomically heavy burden upon the populace. If one further considers the crushing corvée (徭役) that the Han government compelled the commoners to endure, it seems there is a severe deficit of rationale to presume that land rent in classical-era China had already surpassed forced labor to become the *mainstream mode of exploitation*.

Within our nation's history, the monumental epoch marking the shift of the exploitation's center of gravity from labor power to land ought to be the implementation of the "Two-Tax System" (两税法) during the middle and late Tang Dynasty. It is highly probable that it was not until the terminus of the first millennium AD that land rent truly became the *mainstream mode of exploitation* within Chinese society. This temporal node is phenomenally fascinating; it is, of course, astronomically later than the chronological node posited by official historiography, yet identically vastly earlier than when the *feudal societies* of Europe and Japan transitioned from corvée rent to rent in kind or monetary rent.

To a certain extent, this reflects the maturation of the *restoration-bureaucratic system* (复辟官僚制度) itself: it no longer attempted to combat *feudalization* (封建化) via directly controlling and distributing land, exactly as the Sui and early Tang dynasties had done; conversely, it transitioned toward sustaining itself predicated upon acknowledging the formation of the *feudal economic system*. Permitting the *landlord class* to exploit via rent/taxes was inherently advantageous to the bureaucratic system itself. Once China's *landlord class* ceased to act exactly like the *resident feudal lords* of the *Early and High Middle Ages* (as well as those of *early medieval China*)—who established manors, provided agricultural means of production, organized micro-level production, and protected peasants using private armed forces—and instead transitioned to relying utterly upon the court's laws and the local magistracy's (衙门) coercive power to extract rent, they mutated into parasites fundamentally devoid of any organizational contribution regarding the development of

productive forces. This, conversely, further annihilated the possibility of them transmuting into genuine *feudal lords*.

Therefore, dramatically enough, an earlier transition into an economic model of exploiting land rent not merely inflicted a political catastrophe upon China, but it ultimately identically stagnated development within the economic sphere. For instance, a universally acknowledged fact is that the institutionalized exploitation of labor power concluded phenomenally late in our nation; the poll tax was not thoroughly abolished until the mid-Qing Dynasty. By that epoch, the Western world and Japan had already entered the *early modern society* long ago. China's history genuinely proves—from a diametrically negative inverse—the positive historical significance of the *manorial economy* during the *Early and High Middle Ages*.

A principle that individuals ought to bear constantly in mind whilst reading Chinese history is this: although a *natural economy* (自然经济) undeniably signifies the atrophy of a *commodity economy* (商品经济), it identically signifies the demise of the forced circulation orchestrated by the bureaucratic system for the purpose of extracting social wealth. Furthermore, what destructs a *natural economy* is not necessarily the development of a *commodity economy*; it is identically highly probable to be the reconstructed bureaucratic system resuming its extraction of social wealth.

The history of *Chūsei* Japan provides an intra-systemic comparison within the *feudal society* (封建社会). We have previously pointed out that during the epoch when the Shōen-Kōryō system (庄园公领制 / manor and public land system) remained operative in Japan's *Middle Ages*, Japanese manors identically possessed a system of forced labor imbued with indigenous characteristics. However, it is noteworthy that throughout the entire historical epoch marking the emergence of the Japanese manorial system, the proportion of rent/taxes within the mode of exploitation was highly likely larger than that of the *Early and High Middle Ages* in Europe.

On one hand, this is because Japan's *feudalization* (封建化) was incubated upon the ruins of a highly mature Ritsuryō state (律令国家 / statutory state), wherein the inertia of the "Zu-Yō-Chō" (租庸调 / tax in kind, labor, and local products) system persistently existed. A more pragmatic reason, conversely, is that Japan's *feudal system* (封建制度) was not established via conquest by *barbarians* (蛮族) *entering the pass* (入关), but rather through samurai groups incrementally usurping political power from within the state apparatus.

The Shōen-Kōryō system chronically maintained a separation between ownership and management rights; the supreme owners of the manor were the court aristocrats and prominent temples/shrines situated far away in Kyoto. Because they were not locally situated within the manor, they naturally

necessitated reliance upon the Azukari-dokoro (预所 / deputies), Geshi (下司 / local managers), and Myōshu (名主 / wealthy tenant farmers) to progressively transport the annual tribute (*nengu*) of the manor to Kyoto. Since it was fundamentally impossible for them to travel to the countryside to personally supervise the peasants' labor, it was identically impossible for them to revere the relatively pure form of corvée rent (劳役地租) exacted by the *resident feudal lords* (在地领主) during the *Early and High Middle Ages* of Europe. Consequently, if analyzed from the perspective of Soviet-style historiography, since land rent occupied a higher proportion within the mode of exploitation in Japan's *Early Middle Ages* compared to contemporary Europe, wouldn't Japan's *degree of feudalization* be even higher than Europe's? We know this is obviously absurd.

The transmutation of manorial Geshi and Myōshu into samurai was decidedly not accomplished overnight. I postulate that it is more appropriate to define Japan's *High Middle Ages* (中世盛期) as the Sengoku period (战国时期), an epoch when the manorial system had already disintegrated. The Sengoku Daimyo (战国大名) virtually, entirely eliminated the intervention of the public power of the Ritsuryō state upon production, actualizing the monopoly and monolithic domination (一元化支配) over land. Via the *Bunkokuhō* (分国法 / domain laws), they established pure feudal contracts and military lord-vassal relationships within their own territories; they orchestrated water management, reclaimed gold mines, and organized production within their domains according to their own requirements. These constitute the hallmarks of a *feudal system* reaching its absolute zenith structurally.

Subsequently, Japan's *Late Middle Ages* (中世晚期) ought to be defined as the epoch under the Shokuhō regime (织丰政权); the *feudal lords* (封建领主) began to disengage from agricultural production, a colossal volume of lower-tier samurai transmuted into professional soldiers receiving fixed stipends, and the mode of exploitation comprehensively transitioned into rent/taxes. This identically corroborates what we articulated when discussing Japan in Chapter Four: Europe's *High Middle Ages* concurrently represented the flourishing epoch of the manorial system, whereas during Japan's *High Middle Ages*, the manorial system had already collapsed.

Japan's *High and Late Middle Ages* manifested conspicuous tardiness alongside rapid transitional velocity. The fundamental rationale lies in the fact that although Japan's *feudalization* was dragged down by the statutory bureaucratic system for several centuries, over this protracted timespan, Japan's level of agricultural production and *commodity economy* were persistently developing. Therefore, when the Sengoku Daimyo ultimately, thoroughly shattered the shackles of the bureaucratic system, Japan's social *productive forces* had already breached the confines of the feudal *natural economy*. The deluge of the *commodity economy* and the introduction of firearms subsequently destabilized the pure feudal structure within the timespan of a few generations. The Shokuhō regime capitalized on this momentum, actualizing the transition toward an *early modern*

society (近世社会) at an astronomically rapid pace, thereby identically composing the historical legends relished by subsequent generations.

Manorial economy (庄园经济**):** No different from the definition universally used in academia.

Feudal political system (封建政治制度**):** The political system (spontaneously) organized after the *feudal landlord class* obtains political ruling power, based on the *feudal economic system*, using the *High Middle Ages* in England, France, and Germany as the standard. Its greatest characteristic is a distinctly hierarchical feudal power system, encompassing a series of rights and obligations; in particular, land ownership and relations of fealty possess a hereditary nature. Within the feudal system exists a military aristocracy acting as the middle and lower strata of the ruling class, translated as knights or samurai, whose maintenance of social status relies on military service.

It should be noted that the above two concepts use the *High Feudal period* as a standard. *Feudal societies* worldwide lasted for as short as four to five hundred years, or as long as over a millennium; obviously, there exists a process of development. For example, as already mentioned in the Beijing Section, judging from the situation of property inheritance systems, the entire *feudal period* witnessed a transition from partible inheritance to primogeniture. Therefore, under the premise of adhering to principles, actual judgments must also be analyzed in conjunction with specific circumstances. From a relatively broader perspective, under the condition where land is the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素), any society where the *landlord class* emerges as the ruling class, completely obtains political dominance, and can enforce its will, belongs to a *feudal society.*

Quasi-feudal system (准封建制度**):** A political system that possesses characteristics of a *feudal political system* to a certain degree but has not reached the standards of a *feudal political system*, taking the Iqta system of the Islamic world and its various local variations as examples.

Feudal society (封建社会**):** A society that implements the *feudal economic system* and the *feudal political system*. The reason why it is only necessary to mention the two aspects of economy and politics is simply that as long as these two aspects are realized, all other factors will spontaneously adapt or emerge.

Feudal characteristics (封建特征**):** The characteristics in the economic, political, military, religious, and cultural fields possessed by a *feudal society.* The main content is precisely found within the *feudal economic system* and the *feudal political system*.

Feudal period (封建时期**):** The historical period during which *feudal society* exists.

Feudalism (封建主义): Although the word "ism" in China is heavily biased towards ideology and economic relations, when I mention *feudalism*, it refers to the collection of all characteristics of a *feudal society*, including economic systems, political systems, military service systems, prevailing religions, social concepts, and so on.

Feudalization (封建化): This concept is used by me to describe the entire process of the evolution of a *feudal society*; it emphasizes a trend of change.

Degree of Feudalization (封建化程度): We can analyze the *degree of feudalization* of a society from two distinct dimensions. At the **macro level**, it can be measured by the degree of dominance that land, acting as the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素), exerts over the *relations of production*, social structure, political organization, and ideology. The higher the degree of land's dominance, the higher the *degree of feudalization*. At the **micro level**, it can be measured by the decisive significance that the ownership of land *(as a means of production)* holds for basic social units—like individuals and families—in acquiring social status and political rights. The greater the decisiveness of land, the higher the *degree of feudalization*.

When we refer to **"***feudalization***,"** we absolutely do not employ the ambiguous concept of "the enfeoffment system" (分封制) commonly used in traditional Chinese historiography, nor do we merely oversimplify it using the "lord-vassal system" (封君封臣制) of Western European history.

In layman's terms: the more a society's economic production relies on land, the more its power structure is built around land, the more it relies on local land control to actualize political organization, and the more it depends on land to sustain its military, identity, rights, and hierarchy—the higher its *degree of feudalization*. Conversely, a *commodity economy*, a *bureaucratic state* (官僚机器), circulating capital, and a surplus labor force will all suppress the decisive status of land within society, signifying a decline in the *degree of feudalization*.

A frequently cited example here is the *daimyo* (大名) of Japan's Sengoku period. Because Japan formally retained the *Lü-ling* (律令制 / Statutory) official ranks during its process of *feudalization*, the dominant role of land was vividly manifested. People often ask: Why was Japan in the late Sengoku period already an unquestionable *feudal society*? Because in that era, a *daimyo* possessing a territory of 500,000 *koku* (石) would almost certainly receive a higher official rank from the Imperial Court than a *daimyo* with 50,000 *koku*. Kinoshita Tōkichirō (木下藤吉郎 / Toyotomi Hideyoshi) came from abject poverty, yet after pacifying the realm, he was able to secure the position of *Kampaku* (关白 / Imperial Regent) and the clan name "Toyotomi no Ason." The

Matsudaira clan was originally an obscure local landholder, but after Tokugawa Ieyasu was appointed *Sei-i Taishōgun*, no one dared to publicly question his status as the "Chōja (Head) of the Minamoto clan." It is precisely because the Imperial Court's official ranks had been reduced to mere decorative embellishments reflecting the *daimyos'* actual strength based on land ownership, that we can assert the Japanese samurai ultimately accomplished the monumental feat of *feudalization*.

How, then, do we distinguish between the ***"ebb tide" of feudalization*** (封建化的退潮) and the natural evolution from a *feudal society* toward a *capitalist society*? The key lies in this: when the importance of land begins to decline in both public and private spheres, *is it capital that succeeds the status of land and begins to assume its original functions?*

For instance, if we compare 17th-century the Netherlands with 14th-century northern India, it is highly likely that land was far more decisive in the latter. However, we absolutely cannot say that "the *degree of feudalization* of 17th-century the Netherlands was lower than that of 14th-century northern India." This is because 17th-century the Netherlands had already exited the *feudal society* and was moving toward a *capitalist society* in accordance with its normal historical progression.

Conversely, if the status of land declines, but what becomes increasingly important in determining social distribution is primary labor (初级劳动力) or bureaucratic power, then this signifies that *feudalization* experienced an *ebb tide* before it was completed! The completion of *feudalization* means that land hands over its original "scepter of power" strictly to capital, and absolutely nothing else**.**

Therefore, when discussing the history of Islam in this text, the emphasis is placed on Islam's capacity to effectively conquer *pre-feudal* regions. Examples include irrigated regions along major rivers, areas with highly developed urban commercial networks, regions where *classical society* had not yet vanished, *early states* or *pre-state societies*, and regions where *feudalization* was extremely weak. In these places, land had not yet thoroughly dominated the social structure; they lacked stable feudal *communities*, deeply rooted local armed forces, and a *feudal religion* profoundly intertwined with society.

As for nations that had already completed their feudal processes, although land no longer dominated the social structure as it did in the *Middle Ages*, the organizational and cultural legacies forged by the *feudal society* remained. These legacies would swiftly translate into *productive forces*, state capacity, and especially military might—which were certainly not something Islamic conquerors could easily shake.

The speed of *feudalization* and the maximum *degree of feudalization* achievable by a region's society are inevitably constrained by its natural geographical conditions; this is a reality no one can circumvent. In eras when humanity's capacity to transform nature was still insufficient, the geographical environment indeed exerted a colossal, sometimes even decisive, impact on human society.

Finally, I would like to clarify: *Why, when determining the degree of feudalization, must we consider the micro level in addition to the macro level?* I have two considerations here.

First, starting from the inherent characteristics of historical research itself: the vast majority of historical materials are heavily influenced by the author's own experiences, making macro-trends relatively difficult to grasp accurately, whereas evidence at the micro level is much more direct. Furthermore, from the perspective of researching the history of social life, historical data does not necessarily have to be sourced exclusively from traditional historical records. Literary works, contract documents, and other textual materials—even non-textual artifacts—can provide massive amounts of information. This is exactly akin to how this manuscript utilizes *Dream of the Red Chamber* to reveal the social panorama of *Late Imperial China*.

Second, the constraints at the micro level can effectively eliminate the interference of *scarcity relations* (稀缺性关系) on macro-level judgments.

Take the Third Dynasty of Ur (乌尔第三王朝), which we discussed in the manuscript, as an example. Long before *feudalization* even began, it was indeed possible for a society to exhibit a pronounced high *land-labor ratio* (人多地少), causing the importance of land to abnormally spike, even eclipsing that of primary labor.

However, we pointed out that the changes in social distribution brought about by *scarcity* typically enhance the dominant role of *state power* in distribution, rather than enhancing the dominant role of the relatively scarce factor of production itself. This is because, under natural conditions, *scarcity* cannot emerge instantaneously. During the process of forming the final state of an extreme *land-labor ratio*, the government can utilize its state power to strengthen its monopoly over land.

Therefore, in a *land-labor pseudo-classical state* (人地型伪古典国家) like the Third Dynasty of Ur, although land appeared to occupy a highly crucial position in the social structure, for its citizens, the social status and political rights they could possess were primarily determined by their position within the Ur bureaucracy! This also proves that the Third Dynasty of Ur can by no means be considered a true *classical state*.

Only when the quantities of various factors of production are relatively balanced, and can be fully translated into *productive forces* under the current technological level, can one most clearly and unambiguously determine which factor of production has secured the primary position.

The definition of *feudalization* could potentially be generalized to class societies in other stages. However, because the *feudal period* is the focal point of this text, and research on *early states* and *capitalist societies* occupies a secondary position, I will not extend the discussion further here.

Feudal landlord class (封建地主阶级): The ruling class in the *feudal economic system*, being the controllers of the means of production and the dominators of social production. However, when I use the concept of the *feudal landlord class*, it solely refers to the situation where it has failed to obtain political ruling power, such as in China during the *restoration-bureaucratic period*（复辟官僚时期）.

Fascinatingly enough, within the classical definitions of Marxist historiography and political economy, the articulation of the concept of the "*feudal landlord class* (封建地主阶级)" is actually phenomenally precise: it refers to the ruling class within a *feudal society* (封建社会) (or a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society) that monopolizes land ownership and, predicated upon this foundation, exploits peasants (tenant farmers) via land rent, usury, or extra-economic coercion (personal dependency relations). The land rent mentioned here naturally encompasses the corvée rent exacted under the *medieval manorial economy*. In summary, the *feudal landlord class* is precisely the entity that dominates social production predicated upon the possession and utilization of land; it is the ruling class within the *relations of production* formed when land occupies the unassailable position of the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素).

Feudal lord (封建领主): The *feudal landlord class* that has obtained ruling power politically; I mainly use this concept in feudal Europe and Japan.

Land ownership in the feudal period (封建时期的土地所有权): No matter what, even in typical *feudal societies* like Western Europe and Japan, the "land ownership" possessed by *feudal lords* could never be entirely identical to land ownership in the modern sense; nor could the legal concepts of pre-modern societies be as clear and perfected as those of *modern societies*. After all, a complete historical stage—the *early modern period* (近世)—separates *feudal society* from *modern society*, and the complexity of contemporary human society is entirely unimaginable compared to any previous historical period. Ultimately, the ownership of land by *medieval feudal lords* was still a type of *usufruct* (用益权) carrying attached obligations. If it were understood as an absolute right of disposal (绝对的支配权), then even the political phenomenon of multi-tiered subinfeudation (层层分封) would be difficult to explain. When we speak of "*feudal lords* acquiring land ownership," it actually refers to the fact that *feudal lords* possessed highly comprehensive powers of management and disposal over their land, such as collecting land rent, exacting corvée labor, exercising judicial power, administrative management, military command, gifting land, inheriting land, and enfeoffing subordinate lords. Most importantly, this power was universally recognized by the entire society and protected by statutory or customary law; it was absolutely not something that could be easily arbitrarily deprived. Thus, we are able to sufficiently distinguish the *feudal lords* of Europe and Japan—who practically governed their hereditary fiefdoms and could enfeoff subordinate lords—

from the military aristocracy of the Islamic world, who merely obtained land revenue rights or tax collection rights as compensation for military service.

Primary factor of production (首位生产要素): Refers to the one factor that holds the primary position among all factors of production. The specific concept is detailed in Chapter 6, Section 4.

The main text mentions three dimensions for determining the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素), which constitute the sufficient conditions for becoming a *primary factor of production*. However, I wish to particularly emphasize a point here: if a certain factor of production (which may concurrently be a means of production) desires to acquire the primary position, then it must possess at least some form of irreproducibility (不可复制性).

Let us ponder an interesting question. In the agricultural age, people toiling on the land required agricultural implements and livestock. In the *capitalist era*, traders on the stock exchange require computers and software. Since the advent of human labor and production, humanity has never been able to divorce itself from the assistance of production tools; production tools undoubtedly belong to the category of the means of production. But why exactly is it phenomenally difficult for production tools themselves to become the *primary factor of production*? Or, taking a step further, why can tools generally not determine the social organizational structure?

The answer is: tools generally possess a high degree of reproducibility; they are frequently capable of proliferation. This generates a consequence: individuals possessing social status and power can effortlessly acquire a massive quantity of production tools, rather than individuals possessing a massive quantity of production tools being able to effortlessly acquire social status and power. This exhibits a colossal disparity compared to irreplaceable, non-renewable means of production like land: agricultural implements can be manufactured in batches, and if broken, they can be re-forged, but land cannot. If an individual does not inherently occupy land, then no matter how many agricultural implements and plow oxen they possess, it is entirely in vain. Therefore, instrumental means of production themselves are generally highly unlikely to forge social relations dominating others; they are predominantly merely the medium through which existing social relations are realized and expanded.

A special case involved within the content of this manuscript is the large-scale irrigation systems in arid regions along major rivers. As a public means of production possessing the nature of infrastructure and explicit spatial attributes, it is diametrically distinct from production tools like agricultural implements and computers that can be carried home. Large-scale irrigation systems possess obvious irreproducibility and spatial attributes, and endow land with productive value; therefore, they begin to acquire the nature of land and can become a formidable force in shaping social relations. Therefore, the text states that the importance of irrigation systems has already been capable of conspicuously suppressing the primary position of land among all factors of production;

this is precisely why irrigation agriculture along major rivers can generate an obvious impediment to *feudalization* (封建化).

This is precisely why, in the short piece independent of this manuscript titled *Thoughts on the Future* (《对未来的思考》), I mentioned that the rise of AI could potentially enable *Minzhi / The people's intellectual and emotional capacity* (民智) to become the *primary factor of production*, rather than Artificial Intelligence itself becoming the *primary factor of production*. Because as it currently appears, AI remains merely a tool; fundamentally, zero obstacles exist to its replication and free acquisition. Identical to myriad production tools of the past, it universally lacks the capacity to allocate other means of production. AI servers cannot determine to whom knowledge belongs; they can merely augment the efficiency of acquiring knowledge. It still merely amplifies the *relations of production* (生产关系), rather than determining the *relations of production*, and consequently, it cannot become the core determining the mode of social organization. Conversely, AI indeed harbors the potential, as a production tool of a new era, to hoist humanity's "irreplaceable creative intelligence" (不可替代的创造性智能) to the position of the *primary factor of production*.

Furthermore, we can also observe the exceptionality of *capitalism* (资本主义). Recall the *primary factors of production* (首位生产要素) that have sequentially emerged thus far: primary labor power (初级劳动力) is naturally irreproducible (不可复制性), or to put it somewhat facetiously, the growth of labor power is inherently generated by labor power itself (through reproductive behavior); land is material, possesses explicit spatial attributes, and possesses phenomenally explicit irreproducibility. By contrast, capital (资本) is vastly more exceptional. Exactly as Karl Marx (马克思) articulated, capital is a type of social relation (社会关系). Regarding its superficial physical morphology, capital is not merely reproducible, but could identically be astronomically in surplus. For instance, paper currency itself can be printed infinitely, and technically, there is zero issue regarding exactly how many copies of an existing production line are replicated. This characteristic identically constitutes one of the cornerstones of the glorious achievements of *capitalism*, namely shattering the physical limitations of land and creating unprecedented material wealth. Conversely, the irreproducibility of capital is concentratedly manifested in the "exclusive barriers" [排他性壁垒] forged upon social relations, encompassing legal monopolies (such as patents and intellectual property rights), economic monopolies (such as capital thresholds), market monopolies (such as branding, network effects, and data hegemony), and ultimately culminating in the concentration of power. Thus, we perceive two pivotal characteristics regarding the irreproducibility of capital:

First, the irreproducibility of capital, unlike the irreproducibility of land, does not belong to the inherent characteristics of the means of production, but relies upon the *superstructure* (上层建筑) constituted by institutional and infrastructural entities alongside social ideology. This dictates that

state power itself possesses the capacity to destroy its irreproducibility. Therefore, individuals can observe disparate articulations regarding this phenomenon across the globe: in a Marxist-Leninist state [马列主义国家] like the Soviet Union, people assert that "the bourgeoisie possesses weakness" (“资产阶级具有软弱性”); in the heart of *capitalism* like the United States, Elon Musk (马斯克) asserts that "it is power, not capital, that exploits" (“是权力而非资本在剥削”). Although these words cannot be entirely believed, they indeed reflect a salient characteristic of *capitalism*: namely, capital is embedded within social organization and power structures, and its independence is vastly inferior to that of land. Therefore, the state apparatus possesses the capacity to infringe upon the irreproducibility of capital via *despotic power* (专制性权力), thereby suppressing the dominant position of capital within production. Therefore, the reason people feel that within a *capitalist society* (资本主义社会), the expansion of state power is more difficult to be checked and balanced by the ruling class (统治阶级), is fundamentally not entirely merely the consequence of the massive augmentation in societal complexity and the subsequent expansion of state institutions. This identically constitutes the rationale why I warned in the manuscript that even developed countries absolutely must not presume that because democratic systems have been implemented for a protracted duration, they can apathetically disregard the threat of the *restoration-bureaucratic system* (复辟官僚制度).

Second, a substantial fraction of the *superstructure* that guarantees capital possesses irreproducibility is the exact fruit borne by a complete *feudalization* (封建化) process. For instance, regarding the recognition and protection of patents and intellectual property, and even the social concepts concerning the limitation and checking of state power, from a pragmatic perspective, it is phenomenally difficult for nations that have not experienced a complete *feudal society* (封建社会) to acquire them. This consequently forges a phenomenally bizarre predicament: multitudinous factors capable of ensuring capital acts as a stable *primary factor of production* (and subsequently maintaining a *capitalist society*), inherently sprouted precisely from within the *feudal society*. This exposes the decisive distinction between capital and land: the inherent attributes of land are fundamentally not altered by social organization and power structures. Thus, we can observe that regions like Western Europe that experienced a *classical society* (古典社会) were capable of *feudalization*; regions like Central Europe and Northern Europe that fundamentally never experienced a *classical society* were identically capable of *feudalization*, because the nature of land fundamentally does not care in the slightest whether the society previously experienced a *classical society*. However, capital does care whether the society previously experienced a *feudal society*, because it is precisely the monumental legacy of the *feudal society* that enables capital to securely occupy the throne of the *primary factor of production*, commanding the society to organize around capital, and establishing a stable *capitalist society*. This de facto forms a "Great Filter" [大过滤器]

of civilization, once again corroborating the thesis of this manuscript: namely, the *feudal period* (封建时期) occupies an unshakable, central position within human civilization.

Naturally, exactly as this manuscript has persistently emphasized, the author himself has fundamentally never witnessed a genuine *capitalist society*; therefore, regarding multitudinous perspectives on *capitalism*, one can exclusively predicate them upon speculation. The cognition of *capitalism* is naturally phenomenally difficult to mention in the same breath as the citizens of developed countries, and consequently, I shall not delve into further research.

Scarcity relations (稀缺性关系**):** Refers to the quantitative contrast among various factors of production based on supply and demand. The status of a deficient factor of production increases, while the status of a surplus factor of production decreases. *Scarcity relations* do not directly act upon *productive forces*, but they exert an impact on the mode of production. The most universally manifested *scarcity relation* in human history is the *land-labor ratio* (人地关系), namely the relative abundance or shortage of labor and land. When all factors of production can be fully converted into *productive forces* under existing technological levels, it can be considered that the factors of production are in a state of relative equilibrium—none is obviously in surplus, and none is obviously in shortage.

Commodity economy and Natural economy (商品经济和自然经济**):** No different from the definitions used in academia.

A question will likely arise: is the rise of the *natural economy* (自然经济) the cause of *feudalization* (封建化), or its consequence?

My view is that many major phenomena in history can never be viewed merely as unidirectional causal relationships; rather, multiple variables may mutually reinforce each other, ultimately entering a new state of equilibrium. The root cause of the *natural economy* gaining dominance over a certain period lies in the fact that *productive forces* (生产力) had developed to such a stage where self-sufficient production surpassed commodity circulation (which entails costs) in terms of comprehensive returns (including risk factors). This is not inconceivable. From the *classical period* to the *feudal period* (封建时期), the growth of *productive forces* was limited. Humanity remained in an agricultural society, and the complexity of the social division of labor had not undergone a fundamental change; thus, it was indeed possible for a large *manor* (庄园) to fulfill the vast majority of production needs. The *natural economy* could gain the upper hand not because *productive forces* were low, but because, during the development of *productive forces*, the production system was still simple enough to allow the *natural economy* to become advantageous. After the Industrial Revolution, even with the rapid development of *productive forces*, it became

impossible to return to that self-sufficient economic model, because the modern production system has become so complex that nowhere can independently complete the entirety of production.

Therefore, the rise of the *natural economy* is an important driving factor for *feudalization*, especially since this process enhanced the status of land among various factors of production. Conversely, however, the *feudalization* process was also further strengthening the *natural economy*. When the *landlord class* considered that, under their current conditions of *productive forces*, the *natural economy* was economically more efficient than a *commodity economy* (商品经济) relying on exchange networks, they would naturally respond. If a large number of producers began to reduce their market participation, the empire's tax revenues would decline, cities would decay, the number of merchants would decrease, currency circulation would shrink, and road maintenance would deteriorate. Consequently, circulation costs would further increase, prompting even more producers to exit the market. The *natural economy* and the *feudalization* process began to mutually promote each other.

Of course, readers still need to be reminded that the phrase "the rise of the *natural economy*" is certainly not as reasonable as "the *natural economy* becoming the most economically efficient." As we mentioned earlier, many so-called "*feudal characteristics*" (封建特征) are essentially derived from a contrast with previous "*classical characteristics*" (古典特征). For regions within Rome, Northern India, and China that experienced *the zenith of classical empires*, they had periods of highly prosperous *commodity economies*, during which the returns of specialized production far outweighed transportation costs. Therefore, when *productive forces* developed to a certain stage, one could observe in these regions that the *natural economy* began to universally replace the *commodity economy* as the dominant economic model. However, for those regions that began *feudalization* without having experienced a *classical era*, the idea of "the further development of the *natural economy*" seems quite peculiar. For many parts of Northern and Eastern Europe, it is hard to say that there was any developed *commodity economy* to die out before overt *feudalization* occurred. During the *feudalization* process of these regions, not only was the *natural economy* developing, but the *commodity economy* was also highly likely developing. The reason is simply that they were too backward previously.

Even considering this from an economic perspective, in the early stage of *feudalization* (封建化), the initial development of the *natural economy* (自然经济) did not necessarily require that self-sufficient land production hold an absolute efficiency advantage over circulation and exchange; it is highly likely that it was sufficient for the former to merely approach the latter in efficiency. The reason lies in the fact that when people make economic decisions, they never solely consider expected returns; rather, they seriously evaluate risk-adjusted efficiency, particularly whether such risks can be controlled, to some extent, in their own hands. Let us take a classic problem as an example: suppose there are four investment methods, A, B, C, and D, and long-term statistics show a clear magnitude relationship in their expected returns. However, even an astute financial expert would not necessarily allocate all funds into the investment method with the highest expected

return, because a high expected return may also entail staggering risks. Ultimately, people will most likely choose a diversified composite investment portfolio. If we conduct random interviews on the street, given one option with a 50% chance of gaining 100 million yuan and a 50% chance of losing 5 million yuan, and another option with a 100% chance of gaining 10 million yuan. The expected return of the former is certainly higher than that of the latter, yet it is highly likely that the vast majority of people would choose the second option!

Human society in the agricultural age was far more fragile than it is today; even land managers could not possibly focus solely on maximizing expected values while ignoring survival probabilities. They had to prioritize the resilience of their production mode, rather than merely pursuing efficiency rigidly. In a society relying on complex circulation networks, land managers had to acknowledge that many risks lay in the hands of regions and actors beyond their control.

Although conducting self-sufficient agriculture on a *manor* (庄园) also depended on the weather, this at least provided the managers with a sense of security that they were still in control of the situation. It is much like how people today know that taking an airplane is not necessarily more dangerous than riding in a car, but why are there far more people who fear flying than those who fear driving? A particularly crucial reason is that, in the event of any accident on an airplane, passengers have almost no possibility of responding themselves; the vast majority of their fate must be surrendered to the heavens, with a minuscule fraction relying mainly on the pilot.

Furthermore, we have indeed seen major historical events such as the Late Bronze Age collapse. It most likely began with agricultural failures, natural disasters, and social crises in a single region. But what might have happened immediately afterward? The tin trade was obstructed, bronze production shrank, armies could not be maintained, social order became even more chaotic, trade routes became more dangerous, and then trade shrank even further. The failure of a few critical nodes was sufficient to trigger a cascading, systemic collapse of a complex international system highly dependent on long-distance trade. Of course, we are not suggesting that people in the late period of *classical empires* knew about the Late Bronze Age collapse; it is almost impossible that they did. However, we must not assume that the ancients were intellectually inferior to modern people; the ancients were fully capable of rationally considering risks and making decisions.

Therefore, it is entirely plausible that even if self-sufficient production had not yet completely surpassed the *commodity economy* (商品经济)—which still existed in the late period of *classical empires*—in terms of efficiency, there would still be some managers who seriously considered attempting to transition to a *natural economy* model. And once the proportion of the *natural economy* increased, the demand for the market would weaken; the reduction in circulation volume would drive up unit transportation costs, which would stimulate more landlords to shift toward self-sufficient production, subsequently causing the scale of trade to shrink even further. That is to say, there exists a threshold determined by the returns and risks of the *natural economy* and the *commodity economy*. Once the relative advantage of the *natural economy* reaches this threshold, it triggers a positive feedback loop, thereby propelling the unstoppable rise of the *natural economy*.

More importantly, the late period of *classical empires* would indeed generate certain risk-structure changes conducive to lowering this threshold, the sources of which were relatively independent of the development of the imperial society itself. For instance, the *barbarians* (蛮族) on the empire's frontiers would also undergo significant social progress during their long-term contact with the empire, posing an ever-growing threat to the imperial borders (certain sporadic migratory behaviors further intensified this threat). Consequently, during its late period, the *classical empire* had to face more wars it was forced to fight; the tax burden rose, the bureaucratic system (as in Rome) became more complex, and the state even actively debased its currency. We can also consider the climatic fluctuations detrimental to the empire mentioned by some scholars. In summary, during its late period, a *classical empire* would encounter numerous factors that drove up the costs and risks of commercial circulation; this further weakened the competitiveness of the *commodity economy* and greatly facilitated the development of the *natural economy.*

Slavery society (奴隶制社会**):** Any society where the phenomenon of exploitation exists, and where the direct exploitation of the exploited's labor power through bodily possession (人身占有) and forced labor dominates the forms of exploitation (in terms of proportion within economic activities), can be called a *slavery society.* A *slavery society* does not necessarily mean that the vast majority of the population are slaves; it is even possible that the majority of the population are not slaves.

Similarly, a society that exists with or even permits the institution of slavery cannot necessarily be termed a *slavery society*—such as the European countries that participated in the triangular trade. Furthermore, those who are directly exploited for their primary labor power to a certain extent might not necessarily be legally categorized as slaves in their identity; for instance, some free citizens were also subjected to mandatory forced labor by the state.

This revision helps resolve the situation where evaluations of *slavery societies* vary wildly across different regions of the world, we should point out that this new definition possesses a certain degree of rationality. The reason lies in the fact that, under the relatively backward conditions of *productive forces* in *early states*, economic exploitation was indeed the primary method for collecting and utilizing the *social surplus* (社会剩余), and the ultimate destination of this *social surplus* directly determines the evolutionary direction of the society. Therefore, if we ignore those fruits of social labor production that cannot be effectively invested due to insufficient quantity and excessive dispersion, and instead focus our observation on the portion that could be executed as effective investment, then the definition of a "*slavery society*" does indeed reflect the true nature of *early states*.

Early state (早期国家**):** This concept is even more ambiguous. My view is that any state that has reached the form of a state, but is clearly in a *pre-classical* and *pre-feudal* state (the reason for emphasizing pre-feudal is that we have already seen some regions bypass the *classical period* and directly undergo *feudalization*), are collectively referred to as *early states*. I hold this view even if it

means classifying some seemingly quite mature and complex states (such as Egypt during the New Kingdom period) as *early states*. Among the modes of exploitation existing in *early states*, slavery occupied the main body, and kinship (血缘) still held an important position in the state's political organization. The territory an *early state* could control was highly limited; its rule relied heavily on cities (city-states) as strongholds of domination, and it was heavily restricted by the natural environment.

Old nobility (旧贵族**):** This term carries the characteristics of communist nations; when I use it, it refers to the ruling class in *early states*. Evolving from clan chieftains, religious priests, and military leaders, they were historically viewed as possessing nobility of bloodline. The foundation of the *old nobility*'s rule lay in their monopoly over the factors of production, with *knowledge* being particularly worthy of attention. The *old nobility* frequently possessed the identity of slave owners simultaneously.

Tribal group (部族**):** This concept is also quite ambiguous and it is basically impossible to reach any consensus. When I use it, it refers to the aggregate of all tribes (部落) within a certain geographical scope, where territorial identity has, to a certain extent, transcended blood relations, and a kind of common consciousness based on culture and language has emerged. A *tribal group* is generally still in the pre-state stage, but in some circumstances, it may be viewed as an *early state*, depending on internationally recognized standards.

Tribal confederacy (部族联盟**):** A political entity formed by *tribal groups*, encompassing a large number of tribes. The difference from a simple tribal alliance (部落联盟) lies in the fact that when I use the term *tribal confederacy*, I emphasize the stability of leadership succession; the ruler of a *tribal confederacy* is no longer produced through election by various tribes, but remains within one tribe for a long period and possesses a hereditary nature.

Community (社群**):** No different from the universal standard used in academia, though I may use it less strictly, sometimes appearing as an abbreviation for "social groups" (社会群体).

Civilization (文明**):** Although it is unlikely that everyone will reach a consensus on the definition of this concept, when I use it, there is no difference from *international universal standards*.

Country / State (国家**):** What is the precise definition of a state? Which regimes in history count as states? This is obviously another issue where consensus is impossible to achieve, but when I use it, there is no difference from *international universal standards*.

International universal standard (国际通用标准**):** When I refer to following "*international universal standards*" for certain concepts where consensus is difficult to reach, I mean the following principle. Assuming that for a particular element, the vast majority of scholars in the world believe it should belong to a certain set, then I will also consider that element to belong to this set. If the vast majority of scholars worldwide believe this element does not belong to the set, then I will also consider it not to belong to the set. For instance, regarding universally recognized states or civilizations, I will certainly view them as states or civilizations; however, for regimes universally acknowledged as not having met the standard of a state, or cultures not having met the standard of a civilization, I will likewise not view them as states or civilizations.

Bureaucratic state (官僚国家**):** Of course, one cannot say that any state possessing some form of bureaucratic system is a *bureaucratic state*; apart from rather primitive *early states* (早期国家), all states possess bureaucratic systems of varying complexity and divergent purposes. When I use the term "*bureaucratic state*," it absolutely indicates that the state's bureaucratic system plays a decisive role in the allocation of social resources (including the tangible, such as land and gold/silver, as well as the intangible, such as authority and information) and the determination of social status. In other words, the destiny of an individual or a family relies highly on their position within the bureaucracy, having no direct relationship with any other factors. It is not the case that a person attains a high position within the bureaucracy because they possess immense wealth, lofty social status, universally known prestige, or play a vital role in social production; rather, it is precisely because of their high position within the bureaucracy that all the aforementioned things can be easily acquired. The bureaucratic system of a normal state is constrained by various social forces, whereas the society of a *bureaucratic state* revolves around the bureaucratic system. Historically speaking, a *powerful coalition of class interests* (阶级利益共同体) is the primary force preventing the emergence of a *bureaucratic state*. Within a *bureaucratic state*, there does not exist a broadly recognized class alliance with unified core interests and formidable political power.

Governance-oriented bureaucratic system (治理型官僚制度**):** The most common bureaucratic system. Its primary purpose is to maintain the normal operation of the existing society. The governance nature of the bureaucratic system primarily reflects the state's capability to actually intervene in social life and effectively implement political decisions; it is mainly related to *infrastructural power* (基础性权力).

Predatory bureaucratic system (掠夺型官僚制度**):** I sometimes also refer to it as an *extractive bureaucratic system* (榨取型官僚制度); it is a type of bureaucratic system that may emerge during prolonged wars or military confrontations. Its primary goal is to efficiently and thoroughly extort the entire *social surplus* (社会剩余), even potentially committing acts tantamount to killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. Under certain circumstances, the massive wealth extracted by this bureaucracy can be channeled into effective investments, but in the vast majority of cases, it

fundamentally amounts to "extracting every single ounce of wealth only to squander it like dirt." The predatory nature of the bureaucratic system primarily reflects the state regime's capability to destroy social conventions and disregard the will of various social groups; it is mainly related to *despotic power* (专制性权力). States operating under a centrally commanded planned economy under Bolshevik rule in the 20th century can, in some circumstances, be viewed as predatory *bureaucratic states*, such as the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Asphyxiating bureaucratic system (窒息型官僚制度): Or termed an *oppressive bureaucratic system* (压迫型官僚制度). Its primary purpose is to eliminate, regardless of cost, any factors that might cause a change in the social status quo. To achieve its purpose, this bureaucratic system may require a massive secret police apparatus and thus become a police state. However, soft methods can equally achieve the goal of obliterating culture; the *restoration-bureaucratic states* (复辟官僚国家) of the Ming and Qing dynasties essentially accomplished this, though it required the long-term domestication of the people. The asphyxiating nature of the bureaucratic system has a certain degree of requirement for both *despotic power* and *infrastructural power.*

Asphyxiating *bureaucratic states* generally exhibit relatively obvious predatory traits; the characteristic distinguishing them from predatory *bureaucratic states* is that the latter's purpose in plundering social wealth lies in making some sort of investment (including military purposes). Yet, in many cases, due to the deceptive nature of political propaganda, it is difficult for people to fully distinguish whether the fundamental purpose of certain government investments is precisely to "weaken the people" (弱民)—for example, the massive war-preparation movements in China and Albania during the latter half of the 20th century. When making the distinction, I basically judge by the results rather than the propaganda; unless the investments made by the government using the people's hard-earned wealth genuinely yield substantial returns, only then will I say this bureaucratic system is a predatory one.

Social surplus (社会剩余): When I use this term, it refers to the resources, wealth, time, or capabilities that remain in a society after the basic survival needs of all its members have been met.

Surplus of social production (社会生产剩余): Although some might question why I define two very similar concepts, there is indeed a distinction when I use them. When I use the concept of the *surplus of social production*, it refers to the surplus resources, wealth, time, or capabilities created by the labor of the entire society, beyond what is necessary to maintain the existing existence of the society. The cost of "maintaining the existing existence of the society" is obviously not lower than "meeting the basic survival needs of all members," because investments are required in various aspects such as administration, religion, circulation, and the military. Therefore, for the same society, unless it is exceedingly primitive, its *surplus of social production* is distinctly less than its *social surplus*.

Social efficiency (社会效率): Refers to the proportion of the *social surplus* that is utilized for *expanded reproduction* (扩大再生产), investment in science, education, literature, and art, improvement of public services and welfare, advancement of humanitarian causes, and promotion of consumption.

Historical sequence (历史序列): Namely, the evolutionary sequence of human society. It sequentially comprises six historical stages: *pre-state society, early state, classical society, feudal society, early modern society*, and *modern society*. Not every nation is obliged to experience, or rather, has the fortune to experience all the stages up to the present. Likewise, many states in history cannot be categorized into any single one of these stages; however, we can absolutely use this *historical sequence* as a basis to position the regimes in ancient human history. For a country like China that completely detached from the *historical sequence*, I sometimes refer to it as a "*derailed state*" (脱轨国家), to indicate that it completely deviated from the normal developmental track of human society.

Here, we shall further supplement the explanation regarding the scale of the object of historical research. That is to say, when we study how the society of a certain region changes along the *historical sequence* (历史序列), what kind of research object is exactly considered a "legitimate" one?

Having read the entire manuscript, readers presumably have an answer as to what kind of spatial unit qualifies as an independent object of historical evolution: namely, whether this society can, over a relatively long period, primarily rely on its own internal mechanisms to complete the evolution of its institutions, *class* (阶级), culture, and economic structure.

Generally speaking, for a society situated in an open world to meet the standard of independent evolution, its social scale must be sufficiently large; otherwise, the reconfiguration of its social structure and the evolution of its institutions would be primarily dominated by external systems, rather than relying mainly on its own internal forces. Conversely, a geographically extremely isolated society, even if its scale is very small, might still be considered a legitimate object of independent evolution.

For instance, a certain principality of the Holy Roman Empire might have a population of several hundred thousand and an area of several thousand square kilometers, but its trade system is attached to the empire, its religious system is attached to the church, its military system is attached to a larger political *community*, and its technological diffusion comes from the entirety of Western Europe; under no circumstances could it achieve independent evolution. In contrast, a certain ancient island nation in the Pacific might similarly have a small area and perhaps an even smaller population, but its social structure and production system are complete, it has extremely little external

communication, and the driving force for its institutional changes comes primarily from within. Then, even if it is exceedingly simple, it possesses the capacity for independent evolution.

The capacity for independent evolution is not absolute; its strength and weakness exist on a continuous spectrum [连续谱]. Regions like China, India, Japan, France, and the United Kingdom have a very strong capacity for independent evolution. However, regions like *Korea*, Myanmar, and Northern Europe have their own evolutionary capacities, but are obviously influenced by large civilizational spheres. Meanwhile, the Holy Roman Empire and the small principalities of Italy are hardly considered to have autonomy and can essentially be regarded as subordinate to a larger system.

The interior of a larger research object still holds the possibility of subdivision; for example, the historical evolution of Northern India and Southern India are not entirely identical. Some regions can be considered independent units for a period of time, but are later swallowed by a larger system and thus lose their capacity for independent evolution, such as Yunnan. Some regions have their capacity for independent evolution strengthened due to political independence, such as Vietnam. The independent evolution of some regions is interrupted by external forces and **then** restarts from a new position, such as Latin America. In ***the Near East*** (近东), many regions changed hands repeatedly, and their independent evolutionary processes were jointly influenced by various civilizational spheres.

With the decisive rise of the Western world in the 17th and 18th centuries, it exerted an exceedingly intense influence on the entire world. Even regions that previously had very strong evolutionary independence, such as India and China, also suffered the shockwaves.

In conclusion, an independent object of historical research refers to a *community* whose social structural evolution is primarily determined by internal dynamics, rather than by external systems.

The Great Expansion (大扩张): Refers to the long-term process wherein, supported by crucial technologies represented by the use of iron tools, the capability of certain *tribal groups* (部族) to transform nature was massively enhanced, which in turn drastically expanded the scope of civilization through large-scale conquests, and rapidly developed societies possessing early-state levels in the conquered regions. This historical phenomenon was particularly prominent during the last millennium BCE, resulting in the formation of a batch of *classical empires* across the Eurasian continent. *The Great Expansion* created the necessary conditions for the formation of *primary classical societies*.

Another point worth noting is that precisely during *the Great Expansion* period, due to frequent wars and the relative *scarcity* of labor, the proportion of slaves in the total population of society was paradoxically larger than during the *early state period*; the stereotype people held in the past about a

slavery society—that of "universally driving slaves into forced labor"—perhaps reflects more of the landscape of *the Great Expansion* period.

Classical characteristics (古典特征): Unprecedentedly (and perhaps never again) vast territorial expanse of the regime, formidable monarchical power, an army highly capable in warfare, a (relatively) mature bureaucratic apparatus, strong state capacity, unified weights and measures and legal codes, a (relatively) complex social structure, possessing a highly centralized large capital, simultaneous surges in the government's *despotic power* and *infrastructural power*, the use of a certain *lingua franca* (四方通语), prosperous urban life, active *commodity economy*, massive circulation of precious metals, open social ethos, relatively high status of women, highly inclusive *social consciousness*, coexistence of multiple schools of thought, state (monarch) sponsorship of large-scale academic institutions and individual scholars, prevalence of rationalism, emphasis on speculative thinking, abundant academic achievements in scientific and technological fields, the emergence of mega-engineering projects, excellent public services, and so on.

Typical classical state/empire (典型古典国家/帝国): *Typical classical states* are sometimes also written by me as *genuine classical empires*; the foundation of their establishment is the *class transition* (阶级更替) triggered during the process of land replacing labor as the *primary factor of production*, namely, the *landlord class* replacing the *old nobility* to become the new *landlord class* (although at this time the *natural economy* does not yet dominate). This process not only generated a massive number of *non-producing bureaucrats* (脱产官僚) but also made it difficult for the ruling class (because it was undergoing transition) to form unified interest demands, which provided conditions for the formation of the *classical bureaucratic system* and the strengthening of monarchical absolutism. The state capacity of *typical classical states* was exceptionally formidable, which implies that their *infrastructural power* reached the highest level prior to the *early modern period*. *Typical classical states* include the Roman Empire during the Principate, the Western Han Empire, the Gupta Dynasty of India, the late Sasanian Empire, should include the Khmer Empire (though data is too scarce), and, in a certain sense, also includes Japan during the Insei (Cloistered Rule) period. *Typical classical states* will possess the vast majority of *classical characteristics*. Because of the robustness of their bureaucratic systems, I sometimes also refer to *classical states* as *classical bureaucratic states*.

Classical bureaucratic system (古典官僚体制): Namely, the bureaucratic system generally formed by *classical bureaucratic states*. The characteristics of the *classical bureaucratic system* lie in the complex backgrounds of its officials, the pluralism of ideologies, and the diversity of pathways to entering government service. Although the *classical bureaucratic system* may form a set of rules to maintain its own operation, the appointment, dismissal, promotion, and demotion of officials by the ruler based on personal needs and preferences remains the primary driving force behind the operation of the *classical bureaucratic system*. Compared to the bureaucratic systems of *early modern and modern states*, a characteristic of the *classical bureaucratic system* is that its official selection system is relatively rudimentary.

Primary classical state (原生古典国家): *Classical states* formed directly through *the Great Expansion* prior to the Common Era (BCE), rather than *classical states* formed in later periods under strong external influence; they existed exclusively in Greco-Roman, Persian, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. Based on observation, basically only *primary classical states* can manifest as *typical classical states* at a certain stage.

Formative classical state (形成期古典国家): Specifically refers to the large vassal kingdoms during the Warring States period of China. Because the process of *the Great Expansion* led by the Zhu Xia (various Chinese states) occurred relatively early, *tribal groups* and *communities* had already been largely eliminated in the latter half of *the Great Expansion*. Therefore, the germination of *feudalism* and the phenomenon of *class transition* in ancient China had already become highly evident by the late Warring States period, which became the prerequisite for the political reforms (变法) in the various vassal states, although China was not yet unified at this time.

Classical society (古典社会): The social formation possessed by *typical classical states* (典型古典国家) is *classical society.*

Classical period (古典时期): In a narrow sense, the *classical period* is the historical period during which *typical classical states* existed. In a broad sense, the *classical period* traces back to the formative period of *typical classical states* and extends forward to the collapse period of *typical classical states*. Under a looser definition, the period during which regimes exhibiting certain *classical characteristics* appeared in relatively backward regions is also viewed as the *classical period* of that region.

Late Antiquity (古典时代晚期): In accordance with the definition by Western historians.

Classical empire (古典帝国): The *classical empire* in a narrow sense is the *typical classical empire*. The standard for a broad *classical empire* can be flexible, but it must at least ensure that no dislocation occurs in its historical developmental sequence. That is to say, once a certain regime is identified as a *classical empire*, the historical stage the local society was in before the establishment of this regime cannot be later than the *classical period*, and the historical stage the local society is in after the end of this regime cannot be earlier than the *classical period*. For example, before the Caliphate of Córdoba was established in Iberia, the Iberian Peninsula had already undergone *feudalization* (封建化); therefore, it cannot be viewed as a *classical empire*, but at best belongs to a kind of *late-classical empire* (晚期古典帝国). Similarly, the *restoration-bureaucratic empires* (复辟官僚帝国) do not belong to *classical empires* either, because northern China had already exhibited obvious *feudalization characteristics* during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. After

the Songhai Empire was defeated by the Moroccans, the territory it ruled not only showed no obvious phenomenon of *feudalization*, but instead regressed to a state where a multitude of *early states* (早期国家) and even tribes stood in great numbers, and various folk religions remained prevalent; thus, it also cannot be viewed as a *classical empire*, but at best a highly developed *early state* due to its important position in the trade network. Likewise, the Xiongnu Empire cannot truly be viewed as a *classical empire*, because the Mongolian region never saw the emergence of a *classical empire* afterward, and *feudalization* did not become obvious until the late Ming Dynasty. I call this judgment principle the *principle of sequential invariance* (序位不变原则), which essentially insists on the following view: even if the so-called *classical characteristics* number in the thousands, the essence of the *classical period* is always a "transitional period" transitioning from an *early state* to a *feudal society* (封建社会). A universally recognized *classical state* should possess a certain number of *classical characteristics*. When I speak of *classical empires*, I generally refer to *classical empires* in the broad sense; otherwise, I will emphasize that I am speaking of *genuine classical empires*.

Chonggang Junfu / Towering Mountains (重冈俊阜): The literal meaning of this term in Chinese is high mountains. I use it to describe the thick filter people hold regarding the *classical period* and *classical empires*; the greatness of classical glory is excessively exaggerated, and too many unrealistic hopes are pinned upon it.

The zenith of classical empires or classical empires at their zenith (鼎盛时期的古典帝国或古典帝国的鼎盛时期): When I use this expression, it refers to the very, very literal historical period when a *classical state* is ostensibly at its most powerful. The only point I wish to remind the reader of is that there is a difference between *the zenith of a classical empire* and the historical period when *classical society* existed. Generally speaking, in the era when a *classical empire* appears most powerful, the *class transition* (阶级更替) has basically been completed, and the *feudal mode of production* (封建生产方式) occupies the mainstream; therefore, chronologically, it is later than *classical society*. The reason the empire has not yet declined due to *feudalization* is that the degree of land annexation is still relatively low, and the feudal manors of the *natural economy* (自然经济) have not yet universally appeared.

Early classical states/empires (早期古典国家/帝国): Refers to massive empires that already exhibited many *classical characteristics* before their societies had developed to the *classical society* stage. These include the Achaemenid Empire of Persia, the Parthian Empire, the Kushan Empire (dubious), and the Maurya Dynasty. The foundation of existence for such regimes lay in the central government's control over economic circulation as well as the autonomy of local *tribal groups* (部族) and *communities* (社群).

Imported classical states (输入型古典国家**):** Specifically refers to a series of regimes on the periphery of China. The societies of these regimes themselves had not developed to the *classical society* stage, but under the influence of China, they prematurely introduced China's bureaucratic system—especially the bureaucratic system of the Tang Dynasty's restoration period (唐代复辟时期)—thus exhibiting some *classical characteristics*. This type of state includes Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla and Unified Silla, Japan during the Asuka and Nara periods, the state of Balhae, and Nanzhao.

Classical nomadic empire (古典游牧帝国**):** Refers to the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu belonged to the spillover of the historical event of the *Great Expansion* (大扩张) occurring in the East Asian nomadic regions, and therefore possessed obvious *classical characteristics*.

Anomalous classical state (异常古典国家**):** Refers to the Goryeo regime on the Korean Peninsula. This state was indeed at the stage of *classical society*, but it erroneously introduced China's *restoration-bureaucratic system* (复辟官僚制度).

Trade-based pseudo-classical states (贸易型伪古典国家**):** Refers to states whose societies were far from developing into the *classical society* stage, but because the region occupied a key position in international trade, they exhibited certain *classical characteristics* under external influence. These include Aksum, Srivijaya, the Khazar Khaganate, Mali, and Songhai. This type of state was extremely fragile and far from being a *genuine classical state*; once its trade status was lost or it collapsed due to military defeat, the local society would still lack signs of *feudalization* (封建化) for a very long time.

Land-labor pseudo-classical states (人地型伪古典国家**):** Refers to states whose societies were far from developing into the *classical society* stage, but because of a severe imbalance in the *land-labor ratio* (人地关系) and the highly obvious situation of limited land and a massive population, the status of primary labor as the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素) was challenged by land. Coupled with the emergence of refined production and the demand for complex cooperation, the state exhibited certain *classical characteristics*, especially an anomalously highly developed bureaucratic system. A representative example is the Third Dynasty of Ur. This type of state was fragile regardless of whether from institutional, environmental, or military aspects.

Late-classical states (晚期古典国家**):** Refers to states that, during the historical period when *classical society* had already ended and *feudalization* had become extremely obvious, still maintained partial *classical characteristics*, especially retaining the *classical bureaucratic system* (古典官僚体制). This type of state relied on its position in international trade and the government's

control over circulation. The most typical *late-classical state* is the Byzantine Empire, and it should at least also include the Caliphate of Córdoba, and possibly the Pala Dynasty of Bangladesh.

Barbarians (蛮族): A collective term for the various ethnic groups that entered the core civilized regions on a massive scale during the late period of *classical empires*. This name does not mean that the *barbarians* were necessarily that backward compared to the *classical empire*; it merely emphasizes their identity as the "Other" (他者) relative to the *classical empire*. After the *barbarians* "*entered the pass*" (入关), the resulting growth in the level of *productive forces* gave them a massive demand to occupy land, thus making them the main force of *feudalization*.

***Ru Guan* / Entering the Pass (入关):** This is a highly Sinicized expression, referring to the process by which a weak and small nation or faction conquers a large state through military victory.

Restoration-bureaucratic states (复辟官僚国家): Refers to a political state where, after *classical society* had completely ended and the *feudal economic system* (封建经济体制) had already emerged, due to the anomalously formidable bureaucratic system, the *feudal landlord class* (封建地主阶级) failed to obtain political ruling power and failed to further evolve into *feudal lords* (封建领主); the *feudalization* process was interrupted and subsequently regressed, causing the *bureaucratic state* to re-emerge. *Restoration-bureaucratic states* include China after the Sui and Tang dynasties, Vietnam after gaining independence from China, and the Joseon Dynasty in *Korea*.

The essence distinguishing *restoration-bureaucratic states* from *late-classical states* lies in the fact that the latter factually lacked the capability to cope with *feudalization*; they could only delay but not stop the impact of *feudalization* on the *classical bureaucratic system*, and still possessed a tendency towards dissolution. However, the *restoration-bureaucratic state* mastered complete political means to suppress the *feudal landlord class*, preventing the formation of large-scale landownership (大土地所有制), leaving the *landlord class* in a politically oppressed position by the *bureaucratic state* just like the ruled classes, and eliminating the threat of *feudalization* to the autocratic monarch and the bureaucratic regime. The *despotic power* (专制性权力) of the monarch anomalously surged precisely while the *feudal economic system* existed.

Restoration-bureaucratic system (复辟官僚制度): The bureaucratic system implemented by *restoration-bureaucratic states*, which underwent continuous changes and steady enhancement from the Tang through the Qing dynasties.

It is particularly noteworthy that many Western researchers consider the staggering waste of the *social surplus* (社会剩余) by the *restoration-bureaucratic system* to be a mere "blunder" (失策). In reality, however, the systematic destruction of the *social surplus*—ensuring that the *surplus of social production* (社会生产剩余) is barely generated at all—is precisely the very means by which the *restoration-bureaucratic system* maintains its own existence. This is because any effectively utilized *surplus of social production* has the potential to bring about changes that the *restoration-bureaucratic system* does not wish to see, which runs completely counter to its goal of "stability maintenance" (维稳).

Nevertheless, the bureaucratic system inherently possesses the attribute of over-expansion, and this is especially true for a *restoration-bureaucratic system* operating completely unchecked by any oversight. Therefore, the *restoration-bureaucratic system* cannot manage to destroy exactly as much *social surplus* as is produced. It invariably leads to a consequence where the social wealth it destroys becomes increasingly massive, to the point where maintaining basic social public services and reproduction becomes impossible. Once it senses a crisis, the *restoration-bureaucratic system* may attempt to save itself; yet, every self-rescue attempt only renders the system itself even more bloated and more destructive. The ultimate result is that the society enters a state of total collapse, which constitutes the declining phase of the so-called ***"dynastic cycle"*** (王朝周期律) in Chinese history.

Ebb tide (退潮): This is a description used personally by me. It refers to the phenomenon where a social stage within a certain *historical sequence* (历史序列)—primarily *feudal society*, of course—begins to have its political and economic systems disintegrate before it has spontaneously evolved and moved towards the next social stage. For example, the restoration of the *bureaucratic state* during the Sui and Tang dynasties, or the Islamic world and India under Western influence, can all be termed an *"ebb tide of feudalization"* (封建化退潮).

Pseudo-modernization (伪近（现）代化): Refers to the phenomenon where regions that have not completely experienced the stages of *feudal society* (封建社会) and *early modern society* (近世社会) introduce—solely under the influence of the Western world—the science, technology, and certain organizations, institutions and ideologies created by major developed countries since the *High Middle Ages*; however, their *social existence* generates a fierce resistance against these overly advanced imported goods. *Pseudo-modernization* is extremely prevalent worldwide.

Religious doctrine (宗教教义): *Religious doctrine* refers to the core beliefs, fundamental principles, and worldview of a religion. Put simply, it is the religion telling people what they should believe.

Religious law (宗教教法): *Religious law* consists of the laws and regulations formulated based on *religious doctrine* to standardize the behavior of believers; it is the concretization and application of doctrine. The function of *religious law* is to guide the behavioral norms of believers in their daily lives, encompassing religious rituals, ethics and morality, social relations, and other aspects. Put simply, it is the religion telling people what they should do.

Classical religion (古典宗教): Religions that responded to the various demands of *classical society* and possessed a relatively good capacity to adapt to various types of "*classical states*." Typified by Mahayana Buddhism, they may include Zoroastrianism, certain branches of early Christianity, and Khmerized Hinduism, and in a certain sense also encompass Han Dynasty Confucian scholasticism (汉代经学)—though I still maintain that Confucianism does not belong to the category of religion.

Classical religions might undergo adaptive changes in *late-classical societies* (晚期古典社会); their mystic tendencies and non-public rituals would increase, and they would further deify the monarch. The most typical example is Vajrayana Buddhism, and it should simultaneously include Eastern Orthodoxy.

Feudal religion / Feudalized religion (封建宗教 / 封建化宗教): Religions capable of adapting to the requirements of the historical process of *feudalization* (封建化), playing a massive role in maintaining basic circulation and technological investment during the early stages of *feudal society*. Compared to *classical religions*, the greatest characteristic of *feudal religions* lies in their penetration into the grassroots of society, being oriented towards the masses, simplifying methods of cultivation, emphasizing "salvation by faith" (因信得救), and possessing highly developed churches and religious orders (教团) that actively participate in social activities. Typical *feudal religions* include Catholicism, Japanese Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism; they should also include Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the majority of sects within Hinduism and Islam, and, in a certain sense, Tibetan Buddhism. However, I want to emphasize that religion is not the essential characteristic of a certain society; religion possesses strong adaptability to changes in *social existence*, and one should not interpret it literally or superficially when making specific judgments.

The end of feudal religion (封建宗教的结束): As a region transitions from a *feudal society* into an *early modern society* (近世社会), secular state apparatuses and various social organizations rapidly expand their capabilities. *Early modern society*, objectively speaking, no longer needs *feudal religion* to play the vital role in social life that it did during the *Middle Ages*. Due to their inherent characteristics, religions' efficiency in assisting economic circulation and technological investment is surpassed by the various newly emerging institutions of the *early modern era*. The influence of religion on social ideology is also not conducive to the popularization of scientific concepts throughout the entire society. Therefore, during the period when a state transitions toward the *early modern era*, various forms of movements opposing *feudal religion* inevitably emerge—from the mildest religious reformations to the most violent activities, such as Oda Nobunaga's suppression of

the *Ikki* (sectarian uprisings), which can all be witnessed in history. Religions that have undergone the baptism of early-modernization will no longer be as strictly managed organizationally (including both doctrine and law) as they were in the *Middle Ages*, and their degree of participation in general social life significantly declines. Of course, as demonstrated by the European Reformation, new religious sects might be even stricter in their demands for moral precepts. The new sects that emerged in regions with the most developed commercial and industrial economies during the Reformation period—such as Protestant Christianity (基督新教)—can, in this sense, be termed an *early modern religion*.

Feudal holy war (封建圣战): Refers to wars instigated by *feudal religions* aimed at acquiring land and implementing the feudal system in the conquered regions, ultimately transforming the conquerors into the ruling class. The most typical *feudal holy wars* are the series of crusades launched by the Germans in the Baltic region starting from the *High Middle Ages*. Many *Jihads* launched by Islamic regimes also possessed the nature of a *feudal holy war*, but because the *feudalization* of the Islamic world was always incomplete, the results were not as typical. Not all hostile actions carrying the slogan of a religious holy war belong to *feudal holy wars*.

Classical lingua franca (古典通语): Sometimes taking the form of a classical universal script (古典通文). It refers to a spoken or written language officially recognized by a *classical empire* and widely used throughout the empire. During the *feudal period* after the end of the *classical empire*, it would still serve as the language used by the feudal religious church, until it was gradually replaced by *feudal national languages*.

Feudal national languages / Vernacular languages (封建民族语言): The languages of various nations formed during the *feudal period*; to be precise, the *feudal national language* is precisely one of the main characteristics that distinguish various nations in later times. The emergence of *feudal national languages* caused the *classical lingua franca* to essentially exit the historical stage. Examples include English, German, Amharic, Bengali, Thai, and so on.

The Landlord-Bureaucrat Compromise (地主-官僚妥协): Refers to a compromise reached between the *barbarians* (蛮族) and the Han Chinese *landlord class* in Northern China. The ethnic minority invaders abandoned the prospect of expropriating the land ownership of Han landlords in order to realize their own nation's *feudalization* (封建化); instead, they allowed chieftains at all levels to transform into bureaucrats at all levels, thus bureaucratizing their own nation. The underclass commoners among the ethnic minorities rapidly degenerated into miserable civilians under the bureaucratic system, indistinguishable from Han civilians, while the ethnic minority rulers became autocratic monarchs. Han Chinese landlords retained their land and continued to participate in state politics as bureaucrats, just as in the past. This process made land ownership, and even land property rights, in Northern China extremely stable under the impact of the great migrations of

peoples; the bureaucratic system was not destroyed by *feudalization* at all, laying the foundation for the formation of the *restoration-bureaucratic state* (复辟官僚国家) and serving as the primary cause for the failure of China's *feudalization*. A similar phenomenon might also have occurred during the process of Islamic conquests.

Co-optation through official ranks and stipends (官位荣禄收买): Refers to the covert weakening measures adopted by the government against the aristocratic great clans (门阀士族)—who were large-scale land owners—during the Sui and Tang dynasties, when China's *restoration-bureaucratic state* was newly established. The rulers conferred high positions within the bureaucratic system upon the aristocratic great clans, luring them into defending the authority of the bureaucratic system and concentrating their residence in Chang'an and Luoyang, thereby preventing them from becoming land-holding lords. The *restoration-bureaucratic state* effectively undermined the foundation upon which the aristocratic great clans were formed: namely, their control over the *means of production* (生产资料) and production itself, as well as their ability to bear military obligations based on land. This ostensible valuing, combined with overt and covert suppression, led to the decline and fall of the aristocratic great clans within three centuries; since then, China's *landlord class* has been unable to voice any noteworthy opinions in politics.

Bureaucratized landlords (官僚化地主): By this point, readers should be highly familiar with the nature of the group known as the *Xiangshen* (local scholar-elites 乡绅) in *late imperial China*. I list these concepts to emphasize that "the opposition between bureaucrats and landlords" and "the inextricable link between bureaucrats and landlords" were phenomena existing simultaneously within the *restoration-bureaucratic state*. The opposition refers to the bureaucratic system preventing landlords from seizing power: the normal evolutionary direction of landlords is to develop into *feudal lords* conducting political rule, but the bureaucratic system prevented this and incorporated the landlords into itself. This is an opposition in the evolutionary path, rather than a clear-cut dichotomy in the resultant outcome. The social status and rights of *bureaucratized landlords* derived primarily from the bureaucratic system, not from their control over the means of production. Their secondary economic identity was as landlords, while their primary political identity was as bureaucrats.

Resident feudal lords (在地领主): *Feudal lords* who reside on the land they own and participate in the production and management of the manor. *Resident feudal lords* possess relatively strong enthusiasm and capability for improving operational methods and raising agricultural levels.

The Han System (汉制): Refers to the political system—supported by China's unique *classical bureaucratic system*—formed through the *Genghua* (Reform) Movement during the reign of the seventh emperor, Emperor Wu of Han, Liu Che. Formed at the climax of the Han-Xiongnu Wars, *the Han System* carried a highly pronounced wartime flavor, exhibiting extreme mobilization

capacity and predatory nature. *The Han System*'s investments in military and technological fields were highly successful; within two centuries, it proved itself to be a terrifying instrument of war and a paragon of government intervention driving technological progress and popularization. Unlike typical *classical bureaucratic systems*, the *classical bureaucratic system* under *the Han System* endowed the entire bureaucratic apparatus with a unified ideology and a self-metabolizing system of official selection, along with standards for evaluation, promotion, and demotion. This led to the emergence of a *scholar-official stratum* (士大夫阶层) that shared common values, benefited through the bureaucratic system, and was highly bound to it. These characteristics of *the Han System* later became crucial reasons for the failure of China's *feudalization* and the reconstruction of the *restoration-bureaucratic state*. The political systems of the Wei and Jin dynasties before the end of classical China can also be viewed as an evolution of *the Han System* during the early stage of *feudalization*.

The Tang System (唐制**):** Namely, the political system implemented during the Tang Dynasty; it serves as a milestone after the emergence of the *restoration-bureaucratic state*. Although *the Tang System* reserved political positions for the then-still-powerful aristocratic great clans and retained a massive number of *feudalization characteristics*, its ultimate goal was always to completely obliterate the threat *feudalization* posed to the *bureaucratic state*—and it indeed possessed the capability to achieve this goal. Because *the Tang System* was able to maintain strong military capabilities in the short term and, unexpectedly, could be utilized in the manner of the *classical era* and the period preceding it, it caused immense destruction to China's periphery.

The Song System (宋制**):** Namely, the political system implemented during the Song Dynasty; it is the mark of complete maturity for the *restoration-bureaucratic state*. *The Song System* utterly eliminated the threat posed by the *feudal landlord class* to the *restoration-bureaucratic system*; it no longer left any place for the *aristocratic stratum* within China's political structure, indiscriminately placing the entire society under the rule of the *restoration-bureaucratic state*. However, *the Song System* still possessed the flexibility to release feudal elements in moments of critical peril to preserve itself. *The Song System* belongs to a highly specialized political system evolved from the processes of Chinese society; it is almost impossible for other nations to emulate it, and therefore it poses less of a threat externally.

Late Imperial China (中华帝国晚期**):** In the Chinese context, this precisely refers to the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Our timeline (本位面**):** Refers to the real world in which we currently live.

Chaotic Era (乱纪元**):** Refers to historical periods characterized by the frequent occurrence of unpredictable, large-scale catastrophic events.

Political efficiency (政治效率): Refers to the capability and efficiency of a political system (e.g., a state, government, political party, etc.) in achieving its established goals or satisfying social needs. It measures the political system's ability to achieve maximum results with minimal resource input.

Social being / Social existence (社会存在): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the sum total of the material living conditions of society that people are situated in during a certain historical period, particularly their *mode of production* (生产方式), *relations of production* (生产关系), and the social structure determined by these relations.

Social consciousness (社会意识): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the sum total of various ideologies, viewpoints, emotions, psychology, and the various forms expressing these contents that arise on the basis of a certain *social being*. Sometimes I also refer to it as *social concepts* (社会观念).

Social foundation (社会基础): When I use this term, it refers to the sum total of the various elements and conditions necessary to constitute the normal operation and stable existence of a society.

***Minzhi* / The people's intellectual and emotional capacity (民智):** Knowledge at the rational level, as well as the ability to acquire, understand, and master knowledge; coupled with emotions at the perceptual level, as well as the ability to generate, perceive, and express emotions.

***Minli* / The people's physical capacity and labor (民力):** Primarily refers to primary labor power represented by physical labor. However, in actual usage, it goes beyond this; for example, Chinese rulers driving the common people into war also belongs to a part of extracting "*Minli*," even though war obviously does not constitute productive labor.

Productive forces (生产力): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the capability of a specific society to transform nature and acquire material resources during the production process.

Relations of production (生产关系): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the mutual relations formed by people during the production process; it is the position people occupy and the form of their mutual connections in the process of producing, distributing, exchanging, and consuming material resources.

Economic base (经济基础): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the sum total of the dominant *relations of production* in a certain society, which constitutes the foundation of the social formation.

Superstructure (上层建筑): In accordance with the views of Marx and Engels, when I use this term, it refers to the sum total of various political, legal, ideological, and cultural institutions established upon a certain *economic base* and serving to maintain that *economic base*.

Labor productivity (劳动生产率): An important indicator for measuring economic efficiency, reflecting the quantity of output generated per unit of labor input. Simply put, it measures how much value is created or how many products are produced by a worker within a unit of time.

Infrastructural power (基础性权力): In accordance with the views of Michael Mann, this refers to the capacity of the state to penetrate and coordinate the various spheres of society through social infrastructure (such as laws, administrative agencies, education systems, transportation networks, communication systems, etc.). *Infrastructural power* emphasizes institutionalized, cooperative, and long-term impact. In Imperial China, those who exercised *infrastructural power* were primarily the general administrative bureaucrats mentioned in Chapter 9, Section 7. Because exercising *infrastructural power* makes it easy for bureaucrats to transform into the ruling class by appropriating the means of production, for the supreme ruler, it is best if these general administrative bureaucrats are rotating officials (*Liuguan* / 流官).

Despotic power (专制性权力): In accordance with the views of Michael Mann, this refers to the capacity of state rulers to arbitrarily intervene in social life without being constrained by institutional checks. *Despotic power* emphasizes arbitrariness, repressiveness, and short-term impact. In Imperial China, those who exercised *despotic power* were primarily the highly specialized bureaucrats mentioned in Chapter 9, Section 7, whose purpose was to expand and safeguard the monarch's interests. They were highly dependent on the supreme ruler and could not easily transform into the ruling class; for the supreme ruler, it is best if these servile retainers (奴才) possess a hereditary nature (世袭性).

Middle Ages and *Chūsei* (中世纪和中世): When I use the concepts of the "*Middle Ages*" spoken of by Europeans, the "*Chūsei*" spoken of by the Japanese, and "*feudal society*" (封建社会), I make no distinction among them; they refer to the exact same thing. By European standards, it roughly refers to the timeframe defined by the social formation between 500 CE and 1500 CE. Sometimes this concept is also expressed as the "*medieval period*" (中古).

Early Middle Ages or Early Feudal Period (中世纪早期或封建早期**):** Namely, the timeframe defined by the social formation of Western Europe between 500 CE and 1000 CE.

High Middle Ages or High Feudal Period (中世纪盛期或封建盛期**):** Namely, the timeframe defined by the social formation of Western Europe between 1000 CE and 1300 CE. The *High Middle Ages* is a historical period of comprehensive social resurgence; during this stage, major social indicators such as population and economic scale surpassed the levels of the *classical period* (古典时期).

Late Middle Ages or Late Feudal Period (中世纪晚期或封建晚期**):** Namely, the timeframe defined by the social formation of Western Europe between 1300 CE and 1500 CE.

The Early modern period (近世/近代**):** Namely, the "*early modern era*." The historical period from the collapse of *feudal society* to the formation of *modern society.*

Early modern society (近世社会**):** A social formation transitioning from a *feudal society* to a *capitalist society* (*modern society*). Its characteristics include the formation of nation-states, *absolutist* rule, the frequent launching of foreign wars with persistently high military expenditures, a surge in economic circulation, intellectual liberation and the Scientific Revolution, the disintegration of the hierarchical system (等级制度), the rise of the civic class (市民阶层), and so on. Because Western scholars have long studied their own *early modern* history thousands of times over, it is impossible for me to add anything new. The only point I wish to emphasize is that *early modern society* possesses characteristics of *class transition* (阶级更替) similar to the *classical period*: capital replaces land as the *primary factor of production* (首位生产要素), and the bourgeoisie is in the process of replacing the *feudal landlord class* (封建地主阶级) to become the ruling class of the state. The relative balance of power among various social classes and the inconsistency of their demands became the *social foundation* upon which the *absolute monarchy* of the *early modern state* could be established and maintained for a certain period. Although it will inevitably cause controversy, I insist on classifying Edo-period Japan as an *early modern state*. Only a very small number of countries in the world have experienced *early modern society*, and having experienced *early modern society* can almost be viewed as a prerequisite for becoming a developed country today (excluding pocket states; simultaneously, for former colonies that inherited the religious, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of their metropoles, their historical processes prior to independence are viewed as identical to those of their metropoles, because these former colonies essentially replicated the social structures of the metropoles).

Absolute monarchy (绝对君主制): Specifically refers to the political system wherein, under the condition of a *class transition* within the ruling class of an *early modern society*, the monarch is constrained neither by the feudal system nor by the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie, resulting in a surge of the monarch's *despotic power* (专制性权力). When I use this term, I strictly confine it to *early modern monarchical states*, represented by Bourbon France. Any political system where the society has not reached the *early modern stage*, yet the monarch possesses immense *despotic power*, cannot be viewed as an *absolute monarchy*—whether it be the Ottoman Empire, the Ming and Qing empires, the Inca Empire, or modern-day Brunei and Saudi Arabia.

Absolutist state (绝对主义国家): No different from the universally accepted definition in academia.

Early modern state (近世国家): States established on the foundation of *early modern society*. Monarchical *early modern states* will generally develop characteristics of an *absolute monarchy* at a certain stage. A few *early modern states* appear to have become republics or figurehead monarchies (i.e., constitutional monarchies) very early on; however, one should note that the indigenous territories of these states are very small, and practically no relatively independent developmental process existed. They originally ought to have been a part of the political balance within a larger *early modern regime*—namely, the regions with the most developed commercial and industrial economies—but ultimately became independent due to Europe's complex political shifts. The Netherlands is precisely such a case.

Capitalism (资本主义): I personally have never been abroad and have never seen it, and the social stage in which this economic system emerged is simply too distant from China; therefore, I cannot make any evaluation. Just following the universally recognized standards in academia will suffice.

Capitalist society (资本主义社会): Ditto. It is difficult for me to comprehend personally; it should be a society that implements a capitalist economic system where the bourgeoisie holds the ruling position. What I want to say is that *capitalist societies*, in the vast majority of regions where they operate relatively well, are built upon the foundation of the local area having experienced an *early modern society*, or else they were colonies established after the Age of Discovery. Obviously, it is absolutely not the case that a society at just any random developmental stage can transform into a *capitalist society* by forcibly transplanting a capitalist economic system. Currently, I can only observe extremely rare exceptions like the Republic of Korea. Considering the connection between the historical processes of China and the Korean Peninsula, I believe South Korea's success holds immense value for China.

Capitalist state (资本主义国家): Ditto. It is difficult for me to comprehend personally. A state established upon a *capitalist society*. As far as I know, the degree of democracy in *capitalist states* is the best in history, which perhaps precisely reflects the significance of the social restructuring that

has occurred since the *High Middle Ages*. However, whether *modern society* and *capitalist society* can truly be equated seems to have no conclusive verdict.

Modern society and Modern state (现代社会和现代国家): Difficult to evaluate; it is hard for me to know exactly what these two concepts look like. At present, it seems *capitalist society* is synonymous with *modern society*, and a *modern state* is a *capitalist state*.

Modernity (现代性): I basically agree that *modernity* is a form of social development and culture opposed to traditional society, with its core lying in the belief in rationality, science, progress, and universality. It originated from the Enlightenment in Europe and gradually expanded globally in the 19th and 20th centuries; however, outside of developed nations, the acceptance of *modernity* by societies in other places is extremely limited.

Postmodernity (后现代性): Allegedly, *postmodernity* is a reflection upon and critique of *modernity*, arguing that the rationality, science, progress, and universality pursued by *modernity* are all illusory; it emphasizes plurality, difference, relativity, and deconstruction. However, since our society is still an unimaginably long way from the *modern era*, I am simply unable to accurately understand what developed countries consider to be *postmodernity*.

Definition of the various parts of Europe (欧洲各个部分的界定): As far as I know, there has never been a unified standard for dividing Western Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and Central Europe; this is even more difficult for a Chinese person like myself who has never been abroad. When I speak of "Western Europe" during the early stage of *feudalization* (封建化), I generally refer to the Europe of the Western Roman Empire, the core of which is England, France, Northern Italy, the Low Countries, and certain regions of western Germany. But why do I sometimes adopt the term "the western part of Europe"? The reason is that history is inherently dynamically changing. A simplest example is that the concept of Germany expanded drastically eastward during the *High Middle Ages*. If it is quite reasonable to say "Germany is a Western European country" in the 10th century CE, the Holy Roman Empire of 1300 CE looks, by all accounts, more like a Central European state. Therefore, when I speak of Western Europe or the western part of Europe, I actually intend to refer to the core region of feudal Europe. This concept indeed expanded over time, while Eastern Europe and Northern Europe are situated in the peripheral regions defined by their corresponding directional terms.

East Asia (东亚): The scope covered by the territories of the five present-day countries: China, North Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. Because Xinjiang and Tibet belong to China, I also consider them to be in the East Asian region. However, when referring to Xinjiang, I view it as belonging to "Inner Asia" (亚洲内陆), and when referring to Tibet, I will simply say it belongs to the main body of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

***Handi* / China Proper (汉地):** Namely, the lands where the Han ethnic group constitutes the dominant majority. It basically corresponds to the scope defined by the 18 provinces during the Qing Dynasty, including Zhili, but excluding the present-day Northeast China region where the Han currently constitute the vast majority. When describing earlier time periods, regions like Yunnan and Guizhou might not be counted within *Handi*; however, readers will understand upon a moment's thought, and it does not affect comprehension.

***Zhongyuan* / The Central Plains (中原):** A Chinese cultural-geographical concept, centered on Henan Province and radiating toward surrounding vast regions such as Guanzhong, Jianghan, Huaisi, and Heshuo, viewed as the cradle of the Chinese nation and the center of civilization.

Northeast Asia (东北亚): The scope covered by Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Northeast China, and the Russian Far East, which should be completely consistent with the universally recognized *Northeast Asia*.

Korea (朝鲜): When I mention *Korea* or Koreans, I basically refer to the entire peninsula or the inhabitants of the entire peninsula. If I am referring to the North Korean regime (北朝鲜政权), it should be very easy to judge based on the context.

Eurasian Steppe (欧亚大草原): No different from the definition used in academia.

Southeast Asia (东南亚): No different from the general classification. However, sometimes when I mention *Southeast Asia*, I might be referring to *Southeast Asia* excluding the parts east of the Wallace Line (华莱士线) and the entire Philippines.

South Asia (南亚): When I speak of *South Asia*, it refers to the scope covered by the territories of the seven countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and does not include Afghanistan.

Central Asia (中亚): When I speak of *Central Asia*, it refers to the six countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. I count Afghanistan as *Central Asia*, but I do not count Xinjiang as *Central Asia*.

The Middle East (中东): When I speak of *the Middle East*, it refers to the region bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Greater Caucasus Mountains, the Caspian Sea, and the Indian

Ocean, and enclosed within Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, and Iran—naturally including the territories of these four countries as well.

The Near East (近东): When I use the concept of *the Near East*, it basically refers to *the Middle East* prior to the Islamic conquests, but the specific regions it includes are smaller: it excludes the central and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula that do not border the Red Sea, as well as the Iranian Plateau with the exception of its southwestern part (the southwestern part of Iran is included in *the Near East* because of the presence of the Elamite civilization / 埃兰文明).

31, Explanations Regarding Certain Personal Judgments

I will conclude by explaining some of my personal judgments; I leave it to the readers to independently discern the ultimate rationality of these judgments.

Why do I perpetually and vehemently oppose the formulation of "national characteristics" (民族性)? The reason is that, as a student of science and engineering, I must assert that it is far too unfalsifiable, making it exceedingly difficult to believe this constitutes science. If we label every distinct trait of every ethnicity in the world relative to others as "national characteristics," then what have we ultimately researched? Is this not equivalent to spouting a pile of useless tautologies? Whenever possible, one ought to devise methods to rigorously research the local historical trajectory of the society in question, rather than attempting to gloss over matters using utterly undefinable concepts. Not only will such concepts cause misdirection in research, but they will identically exacerbate the mutual prejudices among humanity.

Why do I maintain that Confucianism (儒家学说) is not a religion? My reasoning is exceedingly simple: the history of China is frequently far too exceptional, to the extent that it is phenomenally difficult to correlate Confucianism with any specific typology of religion.

First, if readers have followed the sequence up to this point, they can inevitably discern at a glance that Confucianism during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) fundamentally cannot be termed a religion. It was, naturally, no longer a ***classical religion*** (古典宗教), but it was even less possible for it to be a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教). Factually speaking, one of the paramount characteristics of a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家) is its anti-religious nature; the imperial court spared no effort in emasculating the status of religion within social life.

Second, we might perhaps argue that the scholasticism (经学) during the Han Dynasty (两汉时期) constituted a ***classical religion***, as it indeed possessed certain characteristics of ***classical religions***. But what ***classical religion*** monopolized absolute dominance to support the entire ***classical***

bureaucratic system (古典官僚体制)? I contend that the most colossal disparity between Han Dynasty Confucianism and ***classical religions*** lies in the fact that the core objective of a ***classical religion*** is to support monarchical despotism (君主专制), whereas the core objective of Han Confucianism was to support the bureaucratic system (官僚制度). The ideological role of supporting monarchical despotism during the Han Dynasty largely belonged to mysticism, such as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements (阴阳五行). Although Confucianism merged with mysticism either actively *(Confucian scholars proactively embracing it)* or passively *(the imperial court forcibly propelling it)*, there ultimately remained a massive distinction. Under these circumstances, categorizing Han Confucianism as a ***classical religion*** lacks taxonomic necessity.

Furthermore, during the 3rd to 6th centuries, the period when China's ***feudalization*** (封建化) was most conspicuous, the participation of Confucianism in social ideology (社会意识形态) was highly limited; the religious ecological niche (生态位) clearly belonged to the foreign-introduced Buddhism. Conversely, pre-Han Confucianism was ostensibly much like early Buddhism: far more akin to an academic school holding specific philosophical standpoints than any sort of religion.

Since Confucianism across these four distinct periods all exhibited disparities with religion, there is fundamentally zero rationale to consider it a religion. However, many Chinese people, myself included, occasionally adopt the terminology of "Confucian religion" (儒教) when discussing Confucianism. Yet, this is actually an emotional sarcasm directed at its role as the running dog (走狗) of the ***restoration-bureaucratic rulers*** (复辟官僚制度的统治者); it is not genuinely asserting that it is a religion. At best, Confucianism belongs to a category of China's official ideology.

Readers will likely notice that I have persistently discussed two critical regions of the contemporary world—namely, Russia (俄罗斯) and Latin America (拉丁美洲)—exceedingly little, particularly the latter. The reason for this treatment is not because I believe these two regions lack research significance; I maintain that every locale is uniquely singular within the civilizational history of humanity, possessing irreplaceable value. Based on my fundamental judgments, I contend that these two regions ostensibly encountered severe difficulties during the transition from an ***early modern society*** (近世社会) to a ***modern society*** (现代社会). As I have persistently emphasized previously, China fundamentally never even touched the periphery of ***early modern society***, let alone ***modern society***. Therefore, if I were compelled to discuss these two regions, I could only rely upon materials of unverifiable accuracy alongside unassuredly rational inferences or even conjectures; if I wrote in granular detail, it might even mislead others.

Russia's own historical developmental trajectory and geographical position highly likely render it the critical tipping point (临界点) determining whether a region that experienced ***feudalization*** can autonomously modernize.

Exactly where Russia stagnated and regressed is ostensibly a controversial issue. Some might argue that Russia's ***feudalization*** itself was incomplete; upon the arrival of Western influence, ***feudalization*** rapidly ebbed, yet many ***early modern and modern factors*** had fundamentally not yet emerged. Based on this judgment, Russia should possess no essential distinction from Turkey, Iran, and India.

Others might contend that Russia unquestionably **feudalized** regardless, yet conspicuous divergence from Western Europe occurred during ***early modern society*** *(part of the reasons having been narrated previously)*. Although capitalist factors (资本主义因素) emerged and Russia birthed a short-lived bourgeois regime (资产阶级政权) in 1917, the bureaucratic system subsequently achieved a comprehensive restoration under the cover of Marxism-Leninism (马克思列宁主义). Based on this judgment, Russia should be much closer to China. However, Russia's ***restoration-bureaucratic regime*** arrived a full epoch later than China's: China's restoration occurred during the transition from a ***classical society*** (古典社会) to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), whereas Russia's restoration occurred during the transition from an ***early modern society*** to a ***modern society***.

Ostensibly, both arguments possess validity, respectively reflecting partial realities of Russian history. The development of ***feudalism*** (封建主义) in Russia was inherently insufficient, naturally rendering the subsequent development of ***capitalism*** even more insufficient; consequently, the composition of the ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** here is inevitably vastly more complex than in China. Yet I would definitively assert that the degree of similarity between Russia and China unquestionably supersedes the degree of similarity between Russia and Turkey, Iran, and India; this is the most conventional judgment based on 20th-century history.

Observing their realistic manifestations, I still incline toward believing that the second explanation might be more quintessential. After all, the ***early modern and modern factors*** within Russian society are genuinely far too numerous relative to ordinary developing nations. Even the most vehement haters of Russians find it exceedingly difficult to deny that this nation's educational and academic levels indeed exhibit the facade of a developed nation, as do its artistic and cultural creations. This is something that other nations which cannot even touch ***early modern society*** fundamentally cannot compare with. Although the Soviet Union (苏联) and PRC in the 20th century appeared highly similar, some of their manifestations exhibited colossal disparities *(which I shall not detail here)*. This identically corroborates that Russia is a ***restoration-bureaucratic regime*** arriving substantially later than China's.

Latin America (拉丁美洲) is even more unfamiliar to Chinese people. Russia, at the very least, is the neighboring country with which our nation shares the longest land border, and our entanglement of love and hatred has persisted for four centuries. Latin America, relative to China, is situated quite literally on the exact opposite side of this ellipsoid we call Earth.

Today, when researching Latin America, one must definitively select two primary reference points: one being its former suzerains (宗主国), Spain and Portugal, and the other being the United States and Canada, identically located in the Americas. The disparities among various Latin American countries are by no means minor, but viewed as a whole, the development of this region can certainly not be considered poor; out of the 8 billion people globally, Latin America definitely does not rank in the bottom half.

I maintain that the exceptionality of Latin America lies in the fact that, among all colonial activities since the Age of Discovery (大航海时代), the scale in Latin America was colossal, its indigenous demographic composition and cultural beliefs were drastically replaced, and its suzerains were situated in the ***early modern period*** (近世) when they ruled here. Even when Latin America achieved independence, the Iberian Peninsula (伊比利亚半岛) had still not reached ***modern society*** (现代社会). This is utterly distinct from former colonial nations ruled by and subsequently independent from Britain, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. When the Anglosphere nations universally achieved independence from Britain in various forms *(this even includes Ireland)*, Britain as the suzerain had explicitly departed from ***early modern society*** (近世社会); it was already a bona fide ***capitalist country*** (资本主义国家).

The combination of "colony" plus "***early modern state***" patently engenders Latin America's exceptionality. These two concepts individually are phenomenally unfamiliar to Chinese people, and their juxtaposition is even rarer; therefore, I genuinely find it difficult to analyze the historical trajectory of Latin America.

However, there are certain glaringly obvious issues that anyone can definitively perceive. For instance, within the overarching European-dominated colonial system, colonies were explicitly relegated primarily to the position of exporting consumer goods and raw materials. How could any colonial empire possibly be more enthusiastic about the capitalist development of its colonies than that of its homeland? Not to mention that during their rule over the Americas, the domestic capitalist development of Spain and Portugal was itself exceedingly mediocre. Even after achieving political independence, it would require an immense amount of time under the most favorable circumstances for New World nations to alter their division of labor within the international market; even the United States spent nearly a century annihilating the plantation economy of its South.

During the transitional period from a ***feudal society*** (封建社会) to a ***capitalist society***, capitalist factors suffered multifaceted suppressions, while the church and massive hacienda owners (大庄园主) persistently occupied a dominant position in politics for a prolonged duration. Consequently, it is not surprising in the slightest that military dictatorships (军事独裁) and oligarchies (寡头统治) emerged within nominal republics. From my perspective as a Chinese individual, Latin America was at least sufficiently fortunate; after all, their suzerains, Spain and Portugal, were both nations that had genuinely undergone a complete ***feudalization*** (封建化) process. Therefore, although Latin America encountered immense difficulties during the ***early modern period***, with the exception of Cuba, it fundamentally avoided being infected by the "Red Death" (“红死病”) metastasizing from the Soviet Union, even though this peril genuinely appeared imminent during the latter half of the 20th century.

The manuscript previously mentioned that arid/semi-arid irrigation agricultural zones along major rivers have a significant inhibitory effect on ***feudalization*** (封建化), but I had not yet provided a convincing reason. Just a few days ago, while casually surfing the internet, I stumbled upon a clip from a Thai historical drama filmed a few years ago depicting the historical hegemony struggle between Thailand and Myanmar on the Indochina Peninsula [中南半岛], and suddenly realized that Thailand and Myanmar actually constitute a very excellent control group. The time when the Burmans migrated southward in scale from southwestern China to the Indochina Peninsula and established an independent state was significantly earlier than the Tai-Thai peoples; however, by the historical period when they came into close contact with the West, Thailand's ***degree of feudalization*** was obviously deeper than Myanmar's. This distinction highly likely stems from a major geographical fact: Myanmar's ruling center, the middle Irrawaddy River valley (i.e. the **Central Dry Zone**), receives an annual precipitation of merely 600 to 900 millimeters due to the rain shadow effect [雨影效应] and foehn effect [焚风效应] caused by the blockage of the Arakan Mountains, with extremely immense evaporation; furthermore, the temporal distribution of precipitation is very uneven under the influence of the monsoon. Therefore, it is actually a semi-arid region with monsoon deciduous forests and shrubs as its primary natural landscape. A few years ago, when a strong earthquake struck Upper Myanmar, I saw many images of Bagan on television, and it indeed gave the visual impression of a savanna [稀树草原]. Consequently, Myanmar historically relied heavily on irrigation agriculture in the semi-arid regions along the major river, forming a centralized core [集权核心] in the middle Irrawaddy River valley that, although not large in area, was very solid. In contrast, the annual precipitation in Thailand's core ruling zone is sufficient. The Thai people certainly also needed water conservancy projects, but the work they needed to do was the seasonal distribution of precipitation, rather than drawing water from fixed sources through irrigation systems under conditions of overall precipitation deficiency. Therefore, the water conservancy projects formed in Thailand primarily manifested as distributed, point-like

water storage projects, which inherently would not exert a negative impact on the formation of the ***feudal system*** (封建制度).

Through the comparison between Myanmar and Thailand, we can clearly see why arid/semi-arid irrigation agricultural zones along major rivers suppress the process of ***feudalization***. **First**, large-scale irrigation systems demand collective collaboration within large, contiguous tracts of land; if the land is fragmented into pieces, the irrigation system becomes difficult to maintain. Therefore, managing the entire irrigation district as a holistic entity possesses necessity in production. **Second**, large-scale irrigation districts are highly homogeneous in production and possess very weak economic division of labor; thus, the space for self-sufficiency is very limited, relying on external exchange. The ***natural economy*** (自然经济) is difficult to fully develop within irrigation districts, economically obstructing the emergence of the ***feudal system***. **Third**, as previously mentioned in the manuscript during the analysis of the Central Asian region, the reason why the ***feudal system*** possesses extremely high military defensive efficiency is not because of the superficial phenomenon of "having castles," but because it allows agricultural production and military defensive space to highly overlap. Therefore, for feudal rulers in Western Europe and Japan, they could conduct **siege warfare** (笼城作战) at a lower cost, as agriculture itself lacked a massive, easily destructible public node. In regions relying on irrigation agriculture, however, invaders merely need to destroy the irrigation system at a very low cost to rapidly weaken the defenders' agricultural potential. Therefore, rulers of irrigation agricultural zones need to defend irrigation facilities during wars, frequently forcing them to face decisive pitched battles. In summary, irrigation agriculture elevated the military costs of feudal fragmentation, thereby weakening the defensive advantages that the **feudal system** could provide, making it easier to maintain a higher degree of political centralization.

We can also explain this from an even simpler perspective. Assuming there is no irrigation system to channel river water to the arid fields, the productive value of these potentially fertile lands themselves is greatly discounted, or they might simply be wastelands. It is precisely because humans constructed the irrigation systems through labor that the irrigation district becomes a fertile expanse; that is to say, the value of the land is attached to the irrigation system, and land is no longer the final means of production [生产资料] determining productive capacity. Do not forget that, according to the classification of Marxist political economy, the irrigation system itself also belongs to the means of production. Therefore, although we cannot arbitrarily conclude that the irrigation system can become the ***primary factor of production*** (首位生产要素) in irrigation agricultural zones, we can relatively conservatively state that the ones who truly control production are not those who control a specific plot of land, but those who control the entire irrigation system. That is to say, in irrigation agricultural zones, the core means of production *(naturally also a factor of production)* determining social power relations has changed. The water conservancy projects relied upon by large-scale arid/semi-arid irrigation agricultural zones along major rivers are often massive in scale; unlike small-scale water storage projects that can be completed by village ***communities***, they do not spatially overlap with the farmlands they serve in micro-geography. This weakened the dominant position of land in labor production, and subsequently in the construction of

social relations, causing irrigation agricultural zones to be more prone to becoming the core of centralized rule, and difficult to form a **feudal system**.

Finally, I still wish to briefly discuss the issue of introducing commercial and trade factors into the underlying laws of human historical development.

It must be stated that the practice of considering commercial factors when researching the mutations of human history is virtually as ancient as the social sciences themselves. The problem lies in the fact that, in the past, people largely arrived at conclusions diametrically opposed to the facts—namely, the belief that commercial circulation could stimulate the host society to progress at an accelerated velocity, or even achieve leaps across developmental stages. However, when advanced commercial circulation emerges within a relatively backward region, we must not forget that the indigenous societal morphology is inherently backward to begin with. Commercial circulation does not act directly upon ***productive forces*** (生产力), nor does it even act directly upon the ***relations of production*** (生产关系); any elevating effect it might have on either is merely incidental.

For the participants in commercial activities, their primary concern is inevitably whether the commercial activity can be successfully completed; deliberately creating side issues on another country's turf is patently unwise. Therefore, for those pre-modern nations that ascended due to trade, the enhancement of state capacity by trade circulation is primary; in contrast, the enhancement of ***productive forces*** and ***relations of production*** is secondary. Commercial and trade factors augmented state capacity, and state capacity has never been exclusively utilized for benevolent purposes. In reality, it is not difficult for people to observe that the numerous ***Trade-based pseudo-classical states*** (贸易型伪古典国家) cited in this text universally confronted a common problem: any existing system possesses an inherent tendency toward self-preservation. Rather than being conducive to development, the augmentation of state capacity highly likely obstructed development instead.

In today's industrial society, major resource-exporting countries—especially energy-exporting countries—can be regarded as the equivalents of those trade-based nations in ancient societies that occupied vital communication arteries. Theoretically, they could acquire colossal foreign exchange reserves, provide robust welfare guarantees for their citizens, introduce elite talents, and execute investments of staggering magnitudes into fields such as education, culture, and science. But what about in reality? In Russia, Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela, exactly what transpired in the past, and exactly what is transpiring right now? Even for American allies such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, their GDP per capita is indeed sufficiently high, but can they truly be mentioned in the same breath as the developed nations of Western Europe?

A backward societal morphology is fundamentally incapable of effectively utilizing the wealth in circulation to enhance ***social efficiency*** (社会效率); instead, it is far more accustomed to weaponizing this wealth to consolidate its own rule. This is precisely why we frequently observe

that once ***Trade-based pseudo-classical states*** encounter drastic mutations in international trade routes, their former prosperity dissipates instantaneously like smoke; rather than achieving substantial societal progress, they plunge into protracted turbulence and stagnation.

Chapter 13: Insights and Reflections

Writing up to this point, the primary research content has all concluded; this has truly been a protracted journey that constantly mobilized my emotions. Although I might be ridiculed by readers for saying this—after all, my own academic major was hardly studied outstandingly—I still wish to say, from the perspective of a mathematics student, that after completing the sorting of human history, particularly the history of the ***classical period*** (古典时代) and the ***Middle Ages*** (中世纪), what gives me confidence in my conclusions is not merely the comprehensiveness of my investigation and the scientific nature of my methods, but also the "beauty" of the results.

Now we behold a brand-new, unified panorama of human societal development. We do not deny the existence of pluralism; in fact, we have indeed observed that the historical processes experienced by different regions and different ethnic groups exhibit obvious differences. These differences, together with the characteristics of physical geography, have created the rich and colorful cultures of the human world. We can even generously admit that these differences are beneficial to humanity as a whole, rather than merely causing tragic consequences in many places.

Just imagine, what would happen if human civilizations in all parts of the world started at the same time and developed at the same speed? Then they would inevitably experience a glorious ***classical period*** together, and then march toward ***feudalization*** (封建化) together. If the ***feudalization*** process occurred globally at the same time, then many achievements of classical civilization would indeed be destroyed and forgotten during a phase of social dissolution; this, of course, would be highly regrettable. At the same time, it would also be much slower for humanity to progress toward modern civilization through the social reconstruction [社会重构] of the ***Middle Ages***.

In realistic history, when the Western Roman Empire (西罗马帝国) collapsed amidst ***feudalization***, the ***classical empires*** (古典帝国) in ***the Middle East*** (中东) stubbornly survived for several centuries in various forms. They indeed did a great deal of work in protecting, inheriting, and reflecting the achievements of Western classical civilization, ultimately enabling feudal Europe [封建欧洲] to benefit during its process of revival.

Japan is identical; although China's ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚复辟) was obviously disastrous for China itself, the still-prosperous economy and culture of China during the Tang and Song periods [唐宋时期] naturally served as a driving force for Japan's development. If China had ***feudalized*** normally, then large-scale exchanges between Japan and China would likely have been postponed until at least the tenth century, that is, waiting until China itself entered the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期) before occurring. Would Japan still have been able to develop relatively independently into the developed country it is today? I am afraid it is quite unlikely. Judging by the

backwardness of Japanese civilization's starting point relative to China, although it might not necessarily have been conquered by a Chinese feudal regime [封建政权], it absolutely could not have achieved its international and historical status in ***Our timeline*** (本位面).

Therefore, even if I never let slip a single opportunity to mock and critique the Byzantine (拜占庭) rulers, let alone the despotic rulers of China during the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期), I still dare not assert that these various countries that deviated from the general developmental process of human society—namely, the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列)—failed to generate any beneficial impacts.

What we must emphasize is that, during the transition from a ***classical society*** (古典社会) to a ***feudal society*** (封建社会), there was indeed a possibility of technological and cultural regression due to the rise of the ***natural economy*** (自然经济) and urban decline, because they could no longer be passed down without patrons and arenas to utilize them. Just like Goryeo (高丽) celadon, everyone now knows that the porcelain level of the Joseon Dynasty (朝鲜李朝) was even inferior to that of the Goryeo period; did the Koreans become stupid? Not at all, the times merely changed. The astonishing progress China achieved in metal smelting during the ***classical period*** was originally largely forged by centralized, state-run production; if China had genuinely ***feudalized***, then the level and scale of metal smelting would definitely have had a very high probability of regressing during the ***early stage of feudalization*** (封建化早期). It is not difficult to imagine that, consequently, the technology and culture neighboring countries could learn would have been reduced.

The current Western countries of Europe and America, as well as Japan, should indeed feel proud of their miraculous success, yet they identically should not forget the contributions made to their success by those "failed states." Therefore, from the perspective of human historical development, I believe that developed countries indeed bear a greater responsibility toward human society. They should not view the realization and defense of modern civilization solely as their own enterprise, but should rather view it as an enterprise belonging to all of humanity and find ways to shoulder this mission. **Because from an objective perspective, the success of developed countries is the result of the combined action of internal and external factors; the reality is that the failure of some countries leads to the even greater success of others.**

1, Human Societies Across Distinct Regions and Ethnicities Are Governed by Unified Scientific Laws

Behind pluralism emerges a unified scientific law; this scientific law is most intuitively manifested in the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列)—namely, the six historical stages that human societies sequentially enter.

Every society, predicated upon a specific ***social being*** (社会存在), manifests the characteristics of disparate historical stages; the evolutionary process of these characteristics over time strictly conforms to the chronological order demarcated by the ***historical sequence***. Under exceptional circumstances, the development of certain societies will deviate from the ***historical sequence***, yet they are fundamentally incapable of achieving transcendence over it; the consequence can only be catastrophic.

I maintain that what people must constantly etch into their memory is that there are absolutely no insurmountable distinctions between distinct ethnicities and regions. We are all *Homo sapiens*; no matter how immense the differences might be, exactly how massive could they possibly be? Indeed, disparate regions have evolved unique cultures over their protracted development. However, regarding what we currently term "cultural differences," how many of them are, in essence, fundamentally not cultural differences at all, but rather "time lags" (时差) in the historical process? This is such a phenomenally ludicrous state of affairs.

In China, in Japan, in Europe, and in the United States, people everywhere are peddling these absurd perspectives, utterly disregarding the mutations in historical stages to play the game of "dynastic power-scaling debates" (朝代斗兽); they erroneously attribute the consequences of societal development directly to the individual traits of rulers. I believe anyone possessing even a rudimentary understanding of historical discussion forums cannot possibly ignore this. Even within the books I read, domestic and foreign scholars committing such blunders abound in numbers as staggering as migrating carp crossing a river, from which one can deduce exactly how ubiquitous such phenomena truly are.

Consider this, everyone! How many people believe that a monarch in a ***classical society*** (古典社会) expelling foreign ***barbarians*** and expanding territories is the reward for their brilliant and martial prowess, whereas a monarch losing territory during ***Late Antiquity*** (古典时代晚期) is inherently a manifestation of sheer incompetence? We naturally concede that the capabilities of certain monarchs are indeed superior to others, but does an empire in a ***classical society*** possess any comparability whatsoever with a tottering empire in ***Late Antiquity***? During ***the zenith of a classical empire*** (古典帝国鼎盛时期), a mediocre ruler in the overwhelming majority of cases inflicts fundamentally no structural damage; yet during ***Late Antiquity***, even generations of

enlightened monarchs would find it astronomically difficult to salvage the empire's collapsing predicament.

How many people perceive the victory or defeat between two nations strictly as a duel of their monarchs' capabilities? Khosrow I (库思老一世) and Khosrow II (库思老二世) radiated spectacular brilliance in their wars against Byzantium; was this genuinely the merit of brilliant sovereigns and sagacious ministers? Is it not entirely possible that Byzantine Empire was already deeply troubled by ***feudalization*** (封建化), whereas Persia had merely just entered a ***classical society***? The ability of Kanishka I (迦腻色迦一世) of the Kushan Empire (贵霜帝国) to cross the Pamir Mountains (帕米尔高原) and extend his rule to the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains (天山南麓)—was this because the emperor was invincible, or because the Kushans vastly surpassed the Han Dynasty? Is it not entirely possible that the ***classical empire*** of the Kushans was precisely at its zenith, while the Eastern Han (东汉) was already universally littered with feudal manors (封建庄园)?

How many people mistake the ephemeral social phenomena of a nation for its indigenous culture? The Goryeo (高丽) regime could stand its ground without disadvantage against the Liao and Jin empires, yet the Joseon (朝鲜) kingdom was beaten into discarding their helmets and armor by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (丰臣秀吉). So, are the Korean people ultimately martial or un-martial? The Han Dynasty Chinese could mobilize million-strong armies to confront the Xiongnu (匈奴), while the Song Dynasty Chinese merely hoped that peace purchased with wealth was more economically viable. So, are the Chinese ultimately fond of aggression or not?

The factual reality is that these questions are fundamentally not even worth answering. As historical stages mutate, the society itself has already fundamentally changed; how could the orientational predilections of ***social consciousness*** (社会意识) possibly remain identical? I am not mocking Westerners, but it is phenomenally difficult to imagine that these are the precise individuals who actually nearly conquered the entire world. Wherever Europeans arrived, they unilaterally perceived the characteristics of the local society they witnessed at that exact moment as the inherent characteristics of the local culture. It would be one thing if they believed this during the Age of Discovery, but exactly how many Westerners still believe this today?

How many people interpret the consequences of social movements as "civilization" or the intrinsic traits of a civilization? What is essentially ethnic minorities opting for **bureaucratization** (官僚化)—thereby inevitably forfeiting their own ethnic characteristics—is consequently interpreted by official Chinese narratives as the formidable assimilation capacity of Han culture (汉文化). This

joke was originally intended to deceive their own domestic populace, yet exactly how many foreigners bit onto this straight hook exactly like naive fish? What is most farcical, leaving one utterly speechless and at a loss for words, is that there appears to genuinely be a cohort of Western and Japanese scholars who actually believe this fiction; exactly what are they thinking.

Merely observing these assertions within academia or the internet indeed makes it difficult to viscerally perceive exactly how absurd they are, so I shall employ a joke to illustrate the sheer absurdity of human affairs.

An individual saw a group of children in a kindergarten and discovered that many of them were still wetting their beds, so he declared that this ethnicity called "Child" possesses a prevalent "bed-wetting culture" (尿床文化). Another individual saw a group of seniors in a nursing facility and discovered that many of them suffered from Alzheimer's disease (阿尔兹海默病), so he declared that this ethnicity called "Elderly" possesses a prevalent "dementia culture" (痴呆文化).

In reality, if such "brilliant minds" genuinely existed in the real world, absolutely everyone without exception would treat them as imbeciles. This imbecile witnessing children wetting their beds is solely because the children have not yet grown up; his astonishment at the seniors' cognitive impairment is solely because he himself has not yet grown old. Different stages of life naturally possess different characteristics; this is not a disparity between different individuals, but a disparity between different ages.

However, we need only cast a casual glance at the discussions regarding human history to discover exactly how ubiquitous such imbecilic behavior truly is. This is a profoundly lamentable tragedy for humanity's monumental enterprise of comprehending itself.

Therefore, I sincerely appeal—although it is highly probable that scarcely anyone will listen—that when delineating history, we ought to adopt the nomenclature of "the ***historical sequence*****s** (历史序列) of respective localities" as much as possible, entirely discarding the Eurocentric (西方中心论) chronological periodization.

For instance, when the current academic community discusses the history of the Arab Empire (阿拉伯帝国) in the 8th century AD, they are phenomenally fond of utilizing phrasing such as "the Islamic regime of the ***Early Middle Ages***." This invisibly misleads readers, and even the researchers themselves. Indeed, the 8th century AD was already the ***Middle Ages*** for Europe, but within ***the Middle East***—particularly within the territories of the former Persian Empire—***classical society*** (古典社会) continued to exist, the *classical bureaucratic system* (古典官僚体制) remained operative,

and ***feudal society*** (封建社会) had fundamentally not yet emerged. How does this qualify as the ***Middle Ages*** (中世纪) in any sense? Consequently, one ought to state without the slightest hesitation that the Arab Empire of the 8th century was a classical Islamic empire or a ***classical empire*** of ***the Middle East***.

When observing even more backward regions, Westerners manifest an even profounder arrogance. Africa from the 6th to the 15th centuries is also termed "**medieval Africa**"; yet exactly how many regions in Africa genuinely witnessed the emergence of a ***feudal society***? No one cares about this whatsoever. Regarding issues concerning China, Occidentals and Orientals are generally equally muddled. Europeans categorize both the Tang (唐) and Song (宋) empires as "**medieval China**." This can perhaps be dismissed; after all, it is understandable for the West to exhibit a certain degree of arrogance given its advantageous position. But why do some Japanese scholars genuinely believe the Song Dynasty constituted an ***early modern society*** (近世社会)? This is simply unfathomable, no matter how hard one racks one's brain.

When discussing the history of disparate regions, particularly history prior to 1500 AD, they should be named strictly according to their own specific developmental stages, rather than adopting a unilateral European standard. This is because the historical processes of different regions globally possess colossal disparities in their velocity. Take Japan during the late Heian period (平安时代晚期) under the Insei system (院政 / cloistered rule), for instance. Even though contemporary Europe had already entered the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期), we ought nevertheless to classify this period strictly as classical Japan. Similarly, the concurrent Khmer Empire (高棉帝国) was fundamentally not a "**medieval Southeast Asian regime**," but a classical Southeast Asian regime.

If a nation explicitly did not experience a certain historical stage, then that historical stage ought simply not to exist in its nomenclature, rather than forcibly appending it regardless of reality. If the precise societal nature of a specific regime or a specific region during a specific period is genuinely difficult to definitively stipulate, then one should unequivocally employ the European standard strictly to demarcate the chronological timeframe. This is not to imply that Westerners ought to enjoy cultural hegemony, but rather that they are undeniably advanced. After all, Western civilization has traversed the entirety of the ***historical sequence*** up to the present day; therefore, its timetable possesses maximum referential utility.

In summary, the assertion that the "***Middle Ages***" equates to 476–1453 AD or 500–1500 AD ought to be utilized with strict limitations. Western Europe being in the ***Middle Ages*** fundamentally does not equate to other global regions concurrently being in the ***Middle Ages***; the same applies to all other historical stages. As long as we possess the capacity to execute explicit differentiations, we ought to do exactly that. This brings exclusively benefits and zero detriments to Westerners; their capacity to execute granular categorizations is immensely advantageous for comprehending other

global regions. Furthermore, adopting the description of "the historical stages of respective ethnicities" does absolutely zero damage to the West's image; does this not even more transparently manifest their absolute advancement? I am completely incapable of comprehending why Western scholars refuse to do this.

As a Chinese individual, I find it exceedingly difficult to articulate exactly how I feel regarding the concepts held by Westerners. But I maintain they overemphasize their own exceptionalism. There are genuinely multitudinous individuals who believe that ***feudalism*** (封建主义) existed exclusively in Europe and Japan, and that ***feudalism*** is inherently not a universal phenomenon. From the perspective of a resident of a non-Western nation like myself, Westerners are fundamentally clueless regarding precisely how they marched toward ***modernity***. They would rather believe in entirely unprovable factors such as God, luck, destiny, or racial superiority, or otherwise attribute it to scripts, languages, and religions—factors which are themselves inherently determined by ***social being*** (社会存在).

The Japanese identically appear highly insecure from my perspective. Although Japan explicitly parted ways with China on the historical trajectory around 1200 AD, the Japanese *(at least as it appears to me)* still frequently stare at China, doubting where they themselves might have gone wrong. They act as if they fundamentally dare not believe a definitive historical reality: namely, that their ancestors were indeed individuals of supreme intellect and monumental courage, who harnessed their subjective initiative in accordance with the shifting tides of the era to revolutionize ***social being***, thereby carving out the pathway leading to universal peace and prosperity.

It is not that various global regions are running on different tracks; rather, they are all exclusively on a singular track, but Western Europe and Japan utterly and unequivocally, without a shred of suspense, won the race. What exactly is there to conceal or feel ashamed about regarding this? Viewed from any conceivable angle, this constitutes a legendary epic, sufficient to be extolled by descendants for another millennium. Even as an outsider, I cannot help but profoundly admire the martial achievements of the feudal **samurai** (武士); a locale like Kamakura (镰仓) is entirely worthy of being designated the heart of the Asian revolution. If the opportunity arises, I identically wish to visit the Tsurugaoka Hachimangū (鹤冈八幡宫) to witness it for myself.

Only by recognizing that the historical development of distinct regions and diverse ethnicities is, in the final analysis, governed by the exact same scientific laws, can humanity possibly eradicate racism from its fundamental roots. The astronomical disparities in the current developmental levels of distinct ethnic groups are, ultimately, determined by the disparities in social evolution dictated by their historical ***social being*** and underlying developmental laws; it is fundamentally not a question of which ethnicity is superior or inferior. Whether dealing with universally acknowledged "superior ethnicities" or universally despised ones, they are identically entirely encompassed within the objective laws of the social sciences. What determines their destiny is not "racial differences" such as intellect or physical stamina, but the mutation of the historical processes they have undergone.

Under these circumstances, racism naturally loses the very soil upon which it grows. I sincerely hope that one day, when the peoples of various global regions gaze upon one another with curious eyes, they will be capable of realizing that the disparities between them do not stem from race or the absurd notion of "cultural genes" (文化基因), but because the societal morphologies they have experienced, and currently inhabit, are fundamentally different. From the perspective of historical development, the nations of Europe and America, alongside Japan, indeed constitute the paradigms for all of humanity.

2, Perceiving Classical Empires as "Towering Mountains" is a Universal Flaw of Humanity

Over a period of nearly two and a half years or even longer, I have indeed realized that regarding those who misjudged the developmental trajectory of human history—whether they be scholars or ordinary enthusiasts—the overwhelming majority were not necessarily blinded by deliberate propaganda. Rather, they projected far too many unrealistic illusions upon the ***classical period*** (古典时期).

If an individual merely fixates upon a single stage of human history, or exclusively focuses upon a specific region of the world, it genuinely becomes exceedingly difficult for them to escape this ideological trap. I myself was no exception; prior to the end of 2022, my comprehension of the ***classical period*** fundamentally did not differ from that of the majority of people worldwide. The radiance of ***classical states*** (古典国家) is simply too blinding, and their negative information has become difficult to attract attention due to chronological distance. Furthermore, the various phenomena of social "regression" during the early phase of ***feudalization*** (封建化) were exceptionally conspicuous. It would be one thing if it were merely urban decay or the shrinkage of the ***commodity economy*** (商品经济), yet deep down, I am acutely aware that for scholars in developed nations, certain phenomena involving "political correctness" (政治正确) are indeed difficult to address—such as the relative decline in the status of women.

The factual reality is that everyone under the sun, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality, inherently possesses a propensity for immediate gratification and rapid success. This is not surprising in the slightest, nor is it an egregiously terrible thing. Utilizing the minimal cost *(naturally including time cost)* to achieve maximum profit is a biological instinct; if any organism lacked this instinct, it ought to have gone extinct long ago.

From today's perspective, as long as one lacks comprehension of the developmental trajectory of human history, and fails to realize that a ***classical society*** (古典社会) fundamentally possesses zero possibility of evolving directly into a ***modern society*** (现代社会)—and that ***feudal society*** (封建社会) constitutes an insurmountable stage for developing modern civilization—it is phenomenally

easy to fantasize: *If the **classical empires** had not collapsed, would the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Discovery, the Reformation, and bourgeois democracy have emerged prematurely?*

I can observe that academically trained scholars indeed remain vastly more cool-headed regarding this issue; at the very least, they can discern that the ***classical period*** was no utopian paradise, and that ***feudal society***—even early ***feudalization***—possesses historical significance. Yet even many highly prestigious scholars with monumental academic proficiency persistently fail to explicitly and straightforwardly affirm that the ***classical period*** existed merely as a transitional phase from an ***early state*** (早期国家) to a ***feudal society***; and conversely, that ***feudal society*** holds decisive significance in the human developmental process. This remains the case even though it is blatantly obvious from a factual standpoint: regions like Northern Europe (北欧), which fundamentally never even experienced a ***classical society***, are currently among the most developed parts of the Earth.

Analyzed from another perspective, although ***feudalization*** is decisive, it is ultimately not a panacea capable of resolving all problems. In regions with relatively harsh environmental conditions, such as the Ethiopian Highlands (埃塞俄比亚高原) and the Tibet (西藏) region, even if the **feudal system** (封建制度) genuinely emerged, it could not generate substantial ***surplus of social production*** (社会生产剩余) available for technological investment; the meager surplus of social wealth was consumed merely maintaining the most fundamental circulation and public services of the society.

Feudalizing too late identically constituted a massive problem. Even if the ***feudalization*** process had commenced, provided the local society had not yet executed autonomous social reconstruction —meaning it had not reached the developmental level of the ***Late Middle Ages***—then once Western influence began to manifest, the ***feudalization*** process in that region would inevitably experience an ***ebb tide*** (退潮). This does not refer to an essential historical reversal, but rather that ***feudal characteristics*** (封建特征) began to vanish. The ***communities*** at the grassroots level of society remained fragile, and the ideologies, consciousness, and organizations capable of resisting a despotic government remained immature. Yet, the ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) and ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) possessed by the state had already augmented via imported technological mechanisms; this obviously diverges astronomically from early modernization.

Within the Islamic world, ***South Asia***, and ***Southeast Asia***, ***feudalization*** frequently culminated in precisely this outcome. They indeed possessed the opportunity to progress further, but once the Europeans arrived, they could only lament, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (“有心杀贼，无力回天” / *meaning possessing the ambition but lacking the capacity to alter the situation*).

Although I know committing such errors is normal, and I myself was certainly not immune to them initially, nowadays, whenever I think about the multitude of people across numerous global regions who still harbor illusions regarding ***classical empires***, I cannot help but suppress a wry smile. It is perhaps forgivable for Chinese people to yearn for ***classical empires***; after all, speaking frankly, China's historical trajectory veered drastically off course eons ago, and the populace has been subjected to thousands of years of deceptive propaganda, making deception unavoidable. It is not surprising for a French or German individual to feel nostalgic for Rome (罗马), but exactly what is the justification for lamenting the annihilation of Byzantium (拜占庭)?

Although phrasing it this way is highly offensive, from my perspective, it is perfectly normal for a resident of a developed European nation to feel nostalgic for the Roman Empire; however, if they lament Rome's annihilation and actively wish this empire had survived until today, it projects an absurd "aesthetic" (美感)—the aesthetic of an individual feeling discomfort in their knees simply because there is no emperor present for them to perform a kowtow (三拜九叩大礼). This is to say nothing of the fact that the ancestors of many residents of developed nations were precisely those *barbarians* (蛮族) who achieved extraordinary merits (殊勋) during the ***feudalization*** process; this essentially equates to obliterating the life's work of their own ancestors entirely from memory.

The nations surrounding China constitute an identical disaster zone regarding this perception. The Japanese fare slightly better. Although it remains highly comical that the Japanese—having been China's neighbor for twenty centuries—still possess a rather chaotic understanding of China's historical trajectory, Japan's geopolitical position is indeed genuinely exceptional. Whether within ***East Asia***, where the tributary system of the Chinese empire once prevailed, or among modern developed nations that share relatively aligned values, Japan perpetually appears somewhat as an anomaly. Therefore, the Japanese somewhat incline toward emphasizing the exceptionality of their own national history and deeming it a matter of pride. As far as I know, many Daimyo (大名) from Japan's Sengoku period (战国时期) are regarded as local heroes.

The social cognition of South Korea and Vietnam appears exceedingly absurd even today: both nations attempt to emphasize certain cultures and traditions originating from China as their own cultures and traditions. I find it phenomenally bizarre: what exactly is so magnificent about these cultures and traditions that makes them cherish them so deeply? I have no desire to conceal this point: every time I encounter similar news in China—although there is invariably embellishment from the officialdom inciting nationalism—South Korea and Vietnam inevitably did *something* to trigger it.

I fundamentally fail to comprehend what exactly is worth fighting over regarding these traditional East Asian cultures. A cluster of ***restoration-bureaucratic states*** (复辟官僚国家)—surely no one genuinely believes they could produce anything of actual value! To me, South Korea and Vietnam

resemble a slum dweller watching someone wander aimlessly through the slums, picking up someone else's garbage and treating it as treasure.

Their attitude toward Chinese characters (汉字) is identically thus: desiring to sever ties yet concurrently reluctant to do so, attempting to reap all the benefits, thereby generating numerous incidents that leave outsiders utterly speechless. Although, as a native speaker of Chinese, I naturally possess an emotional attachment to the Chinese language, for ***Korea*** and Vietnam, abolishing Chinese characters is by no means an unpardonable treason. According to the normal process of ***feudalization*** (封建化), they inherently ought to possess their own ***vernacular languages*** (封建民族语言) and scripts. This action possesses historical righteousness; the Chinese have zero justification to criticize it.

One wonders when Koreans and Vietnamese will finally realize that China's ***restoration-bureaucratic empire*** and its tributary system (朝贡体系) were an astonishing catastrophe for the entire periphery of China. Since they are already independent, maintaining a respectful distance from these historical issues would suffice; insisting on leaning into them genuinely appears profoundly unwise. Even as a Chinese individual, I must concede that the **"*Towering Mountains*"** (重冈俊阜) might actually possess some dark magic, capable of making both Koreans and Vietnamese believe that "Little China" (“小中华”) is a complimentary term.

The Korean attitude toward the Ming Dynasty (明朝) is, from my perspective, identically a highly comical topic. It is alleged that even in present-day South Korea, there are individuals who believe the Ming Dynasty bestowed the "grace of profound reconstruction" (再造之恩) upon ***Korea***. I find it unfathomable that *Sadaejuui* (事大主义 / Flunkeyism) still exists in the 21st century.

The Koreans truly epitomize knowing only the surface but not the essence. They astutely perceived the reality that without Ming intervention, they would have struggled to survive Toyotomi Hideyoshi's (丰臣秀吉) invasion, yet they were insufficiently astute to perceive exactly what caused ***Korea*** to be beaten to a pulp by Japan. A unified Japan was definitively stronger than ***Korea*** at that time; however, whether measured by population or converted into Japan's Kokudaka system (石高制), ***Korea***'s sheer mass equated to more than half of Japan. Furthermore, Toyotomi Hideyoshi did not mobilize every Daimyo (大名) across Japan to participate in the war; he prioritized dispatching his own direct affiliates for expansion. How could he possibly not retain some defense against the Daimyo of Eastern Japan?

Thus, the forces committed to the war by both sides should theoretically have been roughly equivalent. The Japanese army had to execute a trans-marine expedition, and the Korean Peninsula is hardly flat terrain; why, then, did they lose so catastrophically? The core reason lies in the fact that the Joseon Dynasty of Korea (朝鲜李朝) was identically a ***restoration-bureaucratic regime*** (复辟官僚政权). The Ming Emperor and the Korean King genuinely achieved mutually beneficial extraction within the tributary system: *"Rulers of **restoration-bureaucratic states**, unite."* Both sides provided legitimacy for each other's despotic bureaucratic rule domestically. Naturally, relatively speaking, the assistance provided by the Ming Dynasty to the Korean King was unquestionably greater.

Koreans never reflect upon the fact that their historical trajectory possessed no manifest disparities with Japan's between the 5th and 12th centuries—perhaps even possessing a certain advantage. How did it devolve into such a state by the end of the 16th century? If ***Korea*** had undergone normal ***feudalization*** identically to Japan, upon what basis could Toyotomi Hideyoshi covet ***Korea***? A nation commanding over ten million *koku* (石), bristling with mountain fortresses, requiring a trans-marine conquest—and geographically speaking, this nation's cavalry might even be superior, as objective disparities in equine quality indeed existed. Would ***Korea*** still need to obsequiously beg China for military assistance as it did in actual history?

This entire affair is inherently highly comical: the Koreans themselves embarked upon a dead end under Chinese influence, and consequently, upon encountering feudal Japan, they could only rely upon China to dispatch troops and utilize sheer mass advantage to temporarily repel Japan. Three hundred years later, when China could no longer defeat Japan even relying on mass, the Korean Peninsula was annexed by Japan. The process is so glaringly lucid; I fundamentally cannot discern a single reason why ordinary Korean citizens should feel gratitude toward the Ming Dynasty. Conversely, they possess ten thousand reasons to despise this despotic empire.

The Korean King would naturally express gratitude to the Ming Dynasty, uttering phrases like "never forgetting the grace of profound reconstruction for all eternity"—but what does this have to do with an ordinary Korean commoner? The existence of the Ming Dynasty undeniably benefited the Korean rulers overall, but did the Korean people benefit? Today, South Korea is, at the very least, one of the few developed nations in Asia, and by Asian standards, an exceptionally fine democratic state. Do some ordinary citizens genuinely still believe that a despotic monarch can represent their interests?

From this, it is evident that the average intelligence of peoples across the globe likely possesses zero disparity. As the Chinese saying goes, "When the forest is large enough, it holds every kind of bird" (林子大了什么鸟都有). The precise reason the behaviors of birds in certain forests exhibit universal characteristics is exclusively dictated by the structural nature of the forest itself.

Alas, although it sounds phenomenally ludicrous for an individual living in China to contemplate the destiny of all humanity—after all, my motherland ostensibly perished the exact moment the ***bureaucratic state*** (官僚国家) was **restored** fourteen centuries ago—I still wish to record my anxieties here. Those who read this and wish to mock me, feel free to do so!

According to my observations, geographically speaking, the epicenter of human civilization has undergone three colossal shifts throughout the entire historical period: ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张), ***feudalization*** (封建化), and the Age of Discovery alongside the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps this observation qualifies as a truism, but no one can deny that during all three shifts, the newly ascendant regions were invariably former peripheries of civilization. This perhaps reflects a certain predicament in the development of human civilization: when a society becomes excessively mature at a specific stage, it indeed—either subjectively *(by certain strata)* or inadvertently—manufactures numerous obstacles impeding the march toward the subsequent historical stage. Consequently, it is invariably the peripheral regions, subjected to fewer hindrances, that manage to secure the advantage.

Thus, we confront a predicament of the contemporary world: progress ostensibly has "nowhere to go." First, the planet we inhabit has been exhaustively explored; every tract of land is meticulously mapped, and even indigenous tribes within rainforests have begun to experience the impact of modern civilization. There is fundamentally nowhere left to spawn a "new periphery." Second, having undergone the filtration of several societal stage developments, provided history has not reached its conclusion, the nations currently capable of participating in the competition for the next societal stage can be counted on one's fingers—merely twenty or thirty developed nations.

We indeed observed that during ***The Great Expansion*** and the ***feudalization*** periods, certain locales were capable of executing leapfrog development, overtaking the former epicenters of civilization in a single stride. The Aryans (雅利安人) of Iran experienced an exceedingly brief ***early state*** (早期国家) stage before swelling into a ***classical empire*** (古典帝国); Central and Northern Europe fundamentally bypassed the ***classical period*** (古典时代) entirely and plunged directly into ***feudal society*** (封建社会).

However, those events are already historically remote. By the time Europeans commenced their march toward the ***early modern period*** (近世), the disparities in the developmental processes of various global regions had already become far too colossal. Without completely experiencing a ***feudal society***, a non-colonial nation fundamentally cannot enter an **early *modern society*** (近世社会); without traversing an **early *modern society***, a non-colonial nation identically cannot enter a ***modern society*** (现代社会). Ideological emancipation and the Scientific Revolution altered the

morphology of preceding societies far too profoundly. Today, I fear no one could conceivably believe that a nation, region, or ethnicity capable of leading the future historical development of humanity could somehow fail to have universally adopted modern values; I myself certainly do not believe it.

In the 21st century, it is genuinely phenomenally difficult to expect a ***pseudo-modernized*** (伪近/现代化) region—one that merely belongs to a ***modern society*** on the superficial level sculpted by technology, but whose fundamental essence remains stagnated at some indistinguishable past epoch—to suddenly march to the absolute vanguard of human civilization via leapfrog development and hoist the banner of global leadership. Yet, where can Western nations and Japan look to find a new frontier?

Even though the history of the United States over its more than two centuries has indeed generated myriad miracles, and I concede it is a magnificent nation, I identically refuse to believe that any nation on earth can flourish eternally without decline. Who is capable of succeeding the position of the United States? In the past, many people assumed it would be China, but I can state with absolute clarity that this is unequivocally impossible; such a scenario would be indistinguishable from the direct annihilation of human civilization.

Among the developed nations, can the historically secondary powers like Britain, France, Germany, and Japan shoulder this burden? Europeans once led the world; could they genuinely lead it once more? Or is the United States genuinely capable of executing a "self-revolution" and enduring far longer? Or perhaps, in the future, a genuine united global government will emerge on Earth; but exactly how would this "Earth State" resolve the colossal developmental disparities among its various constituent parts? Or perhaps adventurers like Elon Musk (埃隆·马斯克) indeed possess a valid point: stop fixating exclusively on this trivial plot of land called Earth—if we can land on Mars, wouldn't a new peripheral region materialize immediately! However, standing at the chronological vantage point of 2025, large-scale extraterrestrial migration ostensibly remains far too remote.

During a conversation with B at the beginning of 2025, we identically touched upon this matter; after concluding the topic, we laughed for a prolonged period. After all, no matter how one looks at it, this topic equates to us worrying on behalf of the West and Japan. However, I subsequently felt that the situation might be nowhere near this pessimistic. We are currently living *within* the ongoing historical process, making it indeed phenomenally difficult to judge exactly where this river of history is surging toward. When ***feudalization*** had merely just commenced back then, the intellectuals of Western Europe and Japan universally wailed in agony that the heavens were collapsing. Yet, gazing back upon that era after the passage of a millennium, the precise location upon which they stood was exactly the starting point from which the *Oikumene* ultimately achieved tranquility and prosperity.

3, Historians' Lack of Caution and Comprehension Regarding "Solving the Grand Case"

Readers presumably still remember that my major during both my undergraduate and graduate studies was mathematics; I have received absolutely not a single shred of formal academic training within the realm of the social sciences.

There was only a singular reason I initially embarked upon researching these macroscopic propositions: an endeavor to figure out precisely why Chinese society mutated into the exact state I witness today. Although I was fond of reading Chinese historical records from a phenomenally young age *(naturally, at that time I relied heavily upon vernacular translation editions)*, I must concede that when I first entered my undergraduate studies, I fundamentally barely considered historical issues. Recalling it now, I feel I was exceedingly naive back then; I genuinely believed that comprehending societal mutations only required considering history within a short timeframe.

What exact force compelled me to grow suspicious? The answer is that the propaganda I heard every day, the theories I learned every day, and the factual reality I witnessed every day perpetually failed to align. I discovered that the distinction between the social sciences and the mathematics major I was studying is genuinely astronomically vast. The mathematics major is predicated upon formal logic; it fundamentally requires absolutely no physical experiments to prove it. Conversely, in the social sciences, no matter how rational or how convincing a theory might sound, what can genuinely prove its validity must be factual reality. At that time, I began to sense that while the social sciences naturally cannot divorce themselves from scientific theory, they behave far more akin to an experimental science; rendering judgments relying exclusively upon formal logic is phenomenally dangerous.

Shortly thereafter, I realized exactly how colossal the distinction is between this unique experimental science and the experimental sciences within the natural sciences, such as chemistry. For the natural sciences, provided the technological conditions are sufficient, we can design experiments, record experimental outcomes, or replicate experiments based upon the papers of others. But regarding the social sciences, could we possibly genuinely use a human society to conduct experiments?

On the one hand, it is an issue of feasibility. For instance, in the 21st century, it is fundamentally impossible for us to command a society of millions to simulate the historical process of the initial centuries of ***feudalization*** (封建化). On the other hand, it entails extreme peril. Experiments in the natural sciences can basically be effectively controlled, but if one uses a society to conduct an experiment, exactly how can one guarantee the safety of the lives and property of millions of people?

This is an exceedingly critical juncture. Since we can neither design nor replicate experiments, we are structurally compelled to excavate those pre-existing experimental outcomes—namely, what people commonly term "history." Setting aside humanistic concerns temporarily and speaking strictly from a utilitarian standpoint: the history of humanity constitutes page after page of

experimental reports encompassing all societal experiments; historiography (历史学) is precisely the discipline of authenticating and analyzing these experimental reports; historians are the individuals authenticating and analyzing these experimental reports; and historiographical methodology is the method of authenticating and analyzing these experimental reports.

Only by meticulously authenticating the veracity of these experimental reports, illuminating the concealed relationships among the experimental data, isolating those precious and unique samples, extracting robust control groups, and restoring the conditions under which these experiments were conducted as maximally as possible, can we possibly discern the underlying laws governing human societal development revealed behind these experiments. These experimental reports, serving as the bedrock of factual reality, are fundamentally irreplaceable by any theoretical deduction whatsoever. Consequently, I was compelled to focus my attention upon human history—initially the history of my own nation, and subsequently, gradually necessitating a comprehension of the history of the entire world.

Yet even so, matters still did not proceed in the anticipated direction. I rapidly realized that I was not merely unlocking a dust-covered warehouse to retrieve and research records deposited eons ago; rather, I was "dragged into" a criminal case—a heaven-shaking grand case concerning the very origins of humanity. Starting from October 2022, I discovered that historical research, or broader sociological research, is absolutely not merely a struggle against documents; it is the process of cracking a series of cases perpetrated by a constellation of criminal syndicates of varying proficiencies.

Why do I employ such a metaphor? Because proceeding from the experience I have accumulated over these past few years, I maintain that researching history from the perspective of criminal investigation (刑侦) indeed yields substantial benefits, and historical research is highly likely vastly more arduous than criminal investigation. The reasons are as follows:

First, historical research is not locating archives within an archive room. Archives within an archive room are categorically arranged in chronological order. However, in historical research, the events we comprehend *first* do not necessarily precede the events we comprehend *later* upon the chain of causality. This is exactly identical to solving a criminal case: does the event pointed to by the first-discovered evidence necessarily predate the event pointed to by the later-discovered evidence? Unquestionably not.

Furthermore, during an investigation, the investigator invariably encounters new evidence; occasionally, the emergence of new evidence utterly demolishes the original logical chain—this is phenomenally normal. However, an investigative team usually maintains highly concentrated mental focus while cracking a case, and the duration is relatively brief; therefore, police and detectives can perpetually retain this awareness in their minds. The process of historical research itself spans colossal temporal dimensions; it is highly probable that one piece of evidence is discovered long before another piece of evidence surfaces, with the interim perhaps spanning

several generations of scholars. Consequently, the earlier evidence is exceedingly prone to being endowed with an overly elevated priority, propelling the academic community to forge certain preconceived dogmas; attempting to shatter such dogmas subsequently becomes phenomenally arduous.

Second, exactly as I have stated previously, historical documents and even archaeological evidence can "lie" (说谎). This is identically the same as collecting evidence at a crime scene. Which detective can guarantee that the testimonies of all eyewitnesses are exclusively the truth? Which police officer can determine with absolute certainty that every single trace was not deliberately planted by the perpetrator to misdirect the investigation?

This defenseless naivete is exceptionally glaringly manifest among Western historians *(and identical for the Japanese)*. I am not asserting that Western historical documents are necessarily that much more credible, but according to my observation, they ostensibly have absolutely never witnessed an organized, purposeful, systemic campaign of forgery that spanned millennia. If detectives and police officers unthinkingly believe every shred of testimony and every piece of crime scene evidence, then there is zero reason they would not be deceived by perpetrators possessing supreme intellect and formidable execution capacity.

Third, vastly more arduous than cracking a criminal case is the fact that in historical research, it is fundamentally impossible to genuinely apprehend any suspect or subject them to interrogation. On the contrary, this suspect might perpetually exist, continuously and deliberately interfering with historical research; I presume that by this point, everyone knows exactly what I am referring to.

This is a phenomenally complex issue. Imagine what occurs in a novel if the perpetrator's power is colossal: they would not only possess abundant mechanisms for forgery and methods for exoneration, but naturally, they would identically interfere with the investigation of the case. Exactly what rationale would they possess *not* to do so? Is it possible for the suspect to masquerade as the victim and cry foul? Is it possible for them to return to the crime scene to deliberately create havoc? At the very least, one fundamentally cannot preclude such possibilities.

Fourth, when the police are cracking a case, they can at least forcibly secure the crime scene. Yet what can historians do? *De facto*, what they can accomplish is exceedingly limited: the crime scenes are too colossal, too multitudinous, and frequently, their exact locations remain completely unknown before they are serendipitously identified. Relatively concentrated evidence with high information density, such as documents, is easily destroyed or tampered with; meanwhile, the multitudinous scattered historical relics are phenomenally arduous to comprehensively protect.

Distinct from actual criminal cases, what economic value could the physical evidence of a crime scene hold for ordinary people? Excluding perpetrators harboring anomalous fetishes, would anyone genuinely collect the knife used to kill the victim or the victim's clothing? Yet the circumstances historians confront are entirely different. Artifacts unearthed through archaeological

excavation genuinely command exorbitant prices; consequently, individuals entirely unconnected to the "case" can destroy the scene purely driven by their own interests.

As far as I know, regardless of the locale globally, the smuggling of cultural relics remains perpetually irrepressible despite repeated prohibitions. Even if an artifact is recovered, the information it originally carried has already suffered colossal depletion. For instance, in exactly what posture and alongside exactly what other artifacts was this specific piece positioned? Looters obviously possess zero inclination to care about such issues. However, for cracking the "case," this contextual information might be even more paramount than the artifact itself. For those cultural relics and historical sites temporarily arduous to protect, contemporary archaeologists can only strive to preserve visual and textual records as maximally as possible—naturally, with advanced modern technology, they can execute 3D modeling; their labor is exceptionally grueling yet profoundly meaningful.

Every time a single experimental report of human history vanishes, it is permanently lost; who can guarantee that this specific report was not the key to unlocking the truth? Yet once it is lost, no one will ever know its value again.

Fifth, criminal investigations and historical research possess astronomical disparities regarding the temporal dimensions involved. For historians, new information perpetually overwrites older information; this is a reality against which one is absolutely powerless. No one possesses the authority to order a nation: *Stop developing immediately; maintain the current societal state unaltered for 500 years!*

Not only will physical evidence erode, but human memories will identically blur. Once monumental mutations occur in the ***social being*** (社会存在), several centuries later, people's memories concerning the preceding era will become egregiously distorted, and at this juncture, false memories (虚假的记忆) will inevitably run rampant. Whenever I reflect upon the assertions formulated by Karl Marx (马克思) and Friedrich Engels (恩格斯) during their era, I feel astounded, yet I must simultaneously concede that this was not a problem exclusive to those two.

How many individuals of that era affirmatively denounced the depravity and filth of ***capitalism*** (资本主义)? Yet the problem is: was the **pre-industrial society** (前工业社会)—the world prior to the genesis of ***capitalism***—some utopian paradise of benevolence and righteousness? People can naturally criticize British factories for employing such massive quantities of child labor, but what I wish to articulate is that had those exact children been born in the concurrent Qing Dynasty (清朝), they would likely have starved to death long ago, and infant girls would highly likely have been murdered the exact moment they were born.

Capitalism allegedly plunged interpersonal relations into cold calculations measured strictly by money; but was society genuinely a "Great Harmony" (大同社会) prior to the emergence of ***capitalism***? In an era where starvation followed humanity like a shadow, exactly what ethics and morals could conceivably exist among individuals? At that time, how many years had elapsed since Germany departed the ***Late Middle Ages***? Merely a little over three centuries. But China has already endured fourteen centuries within a ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会). Today, people can solely rely upon the imagination reconstructed from documents and archaeological evidence, alongside analogies to similar societies, to comprehend the more chronologically remote ancient China.

Therefore, I maintain that researchers in sociology, and particularly historians, perhaps genuinely ought to study specific methods of criminal investigation; surely they identically feel humiliated upon realizing they have been deceived. At the absolute minimum, they ought to elevate their vigilance. They cannot possibly indiscriminately believe every word spoken or deem every recorded event to be factual reality; one must unequivocally insist upon maintaining independent thought and judgment. Myriad conclusions ought to be deliberated thrice prior to articulation. After all, the social sciences directly dictate the welfare of humanity; preventing one's own errors from inflicting suffering upon the populace constitutes the most fundamental ethical imperative (基本的義理).

4, Perspectives on the "Grand Chinese Case" and Why I Touch Only Lightly Upon the Ming and Qing Eras

Finally, I wish to further discuss my reflections regarding the "Grand Chinese Case" I have witnessed over these past nine hundred days and nights. I maintain that this heaven-shaking grand case concealed within Chinese history possesses genuinely immense value for all of humanity.

On one hand, this is due to its sheer protraction, immensity, severity, and concealment: over a timespan stretching one thousand four hundred years, three or four hundred million—or perhaps even more—victims perished directly or indirectly because of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度). Some suffered exceptionally gruesome deaths, yet vastly more perished in a vacuum-like silence, without emitting even a single moan. For the overwhelming majority of Chinese people, our lives possess virtually zero meaning whatsoever; the absolute terminus of one's life can be plainly seen from the very day of birth.

China's ***bureaucratic restoration*** (官僚复辟) generated a critical impact upon the entirety of human history, directly altering the overarching developmental landscape of human civilization. This broad-daylight massacre had so many eyewitnesses: initially the nomadic ethnicities of Northern China, the Koreans, the Vietnamese, and the Japanese; subsequently the Indians and the Muslims; at a later epoch, Europeans arrived at the crime scene, and finally, the Americans appeared. Among these eyewitnesses, some were themselves dragged into the case, while others conspicuously

detected bizarre anomalies, yet ultimately, none of them successfully reconstructed the genesis and conclusion of the case.

Perhaps even more paramount is the sheer complexity of this momentous historical event. The renowned American Sinologist Mr. Philip Alden Kuhn (孔飞力) authored a highly famous work, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (《叫魂：1768 年中国妖术大恐慌》); from my perspective, the analytical angle of this book is exceptionally magnificent.

Based upon my comprehension of Chinese history, if the nearly seven centuries across the Sui (隋), Tang (唐), Five Dynasties (五代), and Song (宋)—a history characterized by the seesaw battle between the ***restoration-bureaucratic regime*** and ***feudalism*** (封建主义) ultimately culminating in the essential annihilation of the latter—were primarily political, economic, and social issues. Then, during the six centuries since the Ming (明) and Qing (清) empires, the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** became utterly consolidated, ***feudalism*** no longer posed any threat whatsoever to it, and the development of the entire ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) plummeted entirely into a phenomenally macabre and treacherous state. People neither knew how the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** was birthed, nor did they remotely understand exactly what significance its existence held, yet precisely because of it, they lived generation after generation in inexplicable terror, concurrently and ceaselessly seeking to manufacture legitimacy for its existence.

If we perceive the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** as a ruthless murderer within human history, then exactly what does it look like? Is it China's supreme ruler and bureaucrats? Seemingly not. Is it the government offices (官衙)? Seemingly not either. Is it ***social consciousness*** (社会意识)? Seemingly still not. This is precisely where the bizarre anomaly lies: we know explicitly that the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** slaughtered hundreds of millions of commoners, but exactly how did it physically carry out the killings?

We can employ a metaphor to explain this phenomenon. Imagine an isolated society that universally worships a specific Evil God (邪神); this Evil God is precisely the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***. Within the subconscious of the populace, this Evil God is more terrifying than the most malevolent creation anyone could conceivably imagine, and it sustains its existence exclusively by devouring human beings.

Predicated upon such a concept, the entire society is organized into a highly hierarchical cultic order (邪教教团). People continuously devise every conceivable method to designate others as sacrifices offered to the Evil God, thereby enabling themselves to escape. The higher one's status within this cultic order, the more power one possesses to condemn others as sacrifices, while concurrently, the number of individuals capable of turning *them* into a sacrifice proportionally decreases.

In reality, anyone who has ever lived within Chinese society will fundamentally never forget this point. It is exactly as a famous Chinese proverb dictates: *Only by enduring the most bitter of hardships can one ascend to become the master of others* (吃得苦中苦，方为人上人). Then why exactly must one become a "master of others"? Because within Chinese society, it is either you who are devoured, or I who am devoured; becoming a "master of others" is strictly for the purpose of feeding others to the beast while avoiding being devoured oneself.

However, within a ***restoration-bureaucratic society***, fundamentally no lineage in the world can reap prolonged, enduring profits; even the emperor is compelled to live in perpetual, trembling terror, ultimately still unable to evade the day he himself is devoured. In China, it is phenomenally difficult to argue that even the lives of the imperial family possess any genuine meaning; apart from playing the role of cogs within the bureaucratic apparatus, they serve virtually zero other function. If one compares the dynastic lifespans during China's ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期) against the protracted epochs experienced by those feudal dynasties in Europe and Japan, this point is naturally blatantly obvious.

Driven by the dread of being devoured by the Evil God themselves, people frantically slaughter their own compatriots like maniacs. Yet, from the perspective of an external observer, the Evil God fundamentally does not exist to begin with; those devouring humans are nothing more than humans themselves. If everyone ceased to believe that this Evil God genuinely existed, then mutual slaughter would constitute a completely unnecessary idiocy, and this mutually destructive cultic order (人人互害的教团) would perish. In reality, this closely resembles certain low-budget horror films universally prevalent in the modern world: a group of people, due to certain supernatural factors—such as unknown energies, anomalous magnetic fields, or hallucinogenic toxins—plunges into a collective hysteria (集体癔症), consequently perceiving each other as monsters and attacking one another.

Consequently, we have essentially perceived the shroud of mystery and terror cast over the "Grand Chinese Case." I maintain that the Ming (明) and Qing (清) empires had indeed evolved to such an extreme degree that the Chinese—a demographic cohort chronically constituting one-quarter of the global population—plunged into a collective hysteria (集体癔症) spanning several centuries. Their perception of the world existed within a bizarre hallucination, to the extent that, in the eyes of outsiders standing outside this hallucination, their behavioral manifestations had already drastically diverged from humanity.

This is exactly why I phenomenally admire Mr. Philip Alden Kuhn's (孔飞力) *Soulstealers* (《叫魂》). As a scholar, he undoubtedly possessed a genius-level intuition; by utilizing a highly cunning yet quintessential perspective through an outbreak of this exact collective hysteria, he physically touched its very existence.

Therefore, readers should naturally comprehend precisely why, when authoring this manuscript, I placed immense emphasis upon the classical China and the partially **feudalized** (封建化) China—namely, the eight centuries of history from the 2nd century BC to the 6th century AD. It is identically why I directed considerable attention toward the **early restoration-bureaucratic state** (前期复辟官僚国家)—namely, the nearly seven centuries of history spanning the Tang (唐) and Song (宋) dynasties. Conversely, it explains why I inclined toward merely skimming over the history of the **late restoration-bureaucratic state** (后期复辟官僚国家) from the Ming and Qing onwards.

This is not to imply that I believe research into Ming-Qing history lacks value *(naturally, as I stated previously, researching Ming-Qing history constitutes an emotionally agonizing and profoundly burdensome ordeal for contemporary Chinese individuals)*. I shall employ a metaphor, and the readers will naturally comprehend. Suppose a highly malignant infectious disease with a mortality rate approaching 100% suddenly emerged in the world today. After its initial transmission captures global attention, everyone now knows that if a person contracts this disease, it is virtually impossible for them to survive. So, regarding the patient lying in the isolation ward of the hospital, should we simply abandon monitoring and treating the patient, wait for them to die, and then hastily dispose of the corpse? Obviously not. Although the patient has indeed stepped through the gates of hell (鬼门关), it does not mean we have zero need to comprehend the precise information regarding exactly how this disease kills humans.

To combat such a malignant disease, what humanity requires to know is not exclusively its mode of transmission, but identically its pathogenesis and lethal mechanisms. The historical exceptionality of the Chinese empire lies precisely in the fact that it serves as an astoundingly quintessential and colossal infection specimen. I wish to ask: as fellow human beings, which nation in the world today dares to assert with absolute certainty that it will definitively not encounter the identical catastrophic fate China once suffered? I fear there is none.

Therefore, the history of the Late Imperial Chinese empire (晚期中华帝国) naturally possesses monumental significance, and foreign scholars have already dedicated massive efforts toward this and achieved spectacular triumphs; nothing is more profoundly gratifying than such news.

However, precisely as I have articulated in this subsection, researching the late ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (晚期复辟官僚社会) has already transcended general socio-historical issues. The influence of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚体制) had already permeated every conceivable dimension of the entire society ubiquitously, exactly like a virus that has metastasized throughout the entire physical body. Attempting to research this segment of history with absolute clarity inevitably necessitates the synergistic participation of numerous academic disciplines—such as social psychology—which is fundamentally impossible for any single individual or even a small

team to accomplish. Consequently, I had no choice but to exercise extreme rhetorical caution when handling it, while eagerly anticipating the emergence of more research outcomes; I genuinely hope readers can comprehend this.

5, People Perpetually Forget the Mutating Era, Committing the Blunder of Rigid Criteria Application due to Literal Misinterpretation

Another issue that I find particularly vexing is the playing of semantic games, regardless of whether the meanings of certain vocabulary are conflated intentionally or inadvertently. I maintain that far too many people, when observing history, completely forget the permutations of the era itself. The identical terminology in disparate historical epochs might signify astronomically divergent concepts; such misunderstandings are ubiquitous both domestically and internationally.

Take the Chinese **dynastic cycle** (王朝周期律)—which I have mentioned an untold number of times—as an example. I can assert with absolute certainty that even in China today, the proportion of individuals who can discern that the causes underlying the annihilation of the Han Dynasty (汉朝) and the annihilation of the Ming Dynasty (明朝) are diametrically distinct is less than one in ten thousand. Just because several regimes all collapsed after existing for two or three centuries fundamentally does not signify that the causes of their national demise were identical.

The duration of a ***classical society's*** (古典社会) existence inherently possesses its limits. Because imperial disintegration triggered by ***feudalization*** (封建化) and the collapse of social production under the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制都) are patently two entirely distinct phenomena. Perhaps people might argue that ***The Han System*** (汉制), acting as a ***classical bureaucratic system*** (古典官僚体制), was ultimately still excessively predatory, and that the uprisings and warlord conflagrations during the terminal Eastern Han (东汉末年) resulted in a phenomenally conspicuous annihilation of population and social production. Yet regardless of the circumstances, the annihilation of classical China constituted a normative consequence of the ***feudalization*** process; it is exceedingly difficult to argue that it possessed any correlation whatsoever with the **dynastic cycle** characteristically endemic to the ***restoration-bureaucratic period*** (复辟官僚时期).

Religions and ideological doctrines *(such as broadly encompassing doctrines like Confucianism)* are even more egregious disaster zones regarding rigid criteria application without regarding evolving circumstances (刻舟求剑). Although seasoned scholars are capable of executing differentiations, I sense that people—scholars included—still inherently lack a subconscious reflex to chronologically compartmentalize concepts concerning these ideological dimensions. For

instance, despite uniformly operating under the umbrella of Confucianism (儒家学说), the Confucianism of the Han Dynasty and the Confucianism of the Ming and Qing periods exhibit colossal disparities.

Similarly, regarding Buddhism, at the precise same geographic locale, it could constitute a ***classical religion*** (古典宗教) during an earlier epoch, yet mutate into a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教) during a later epoch. Concurrently, at the exact same chronological moment, Buddhism in one region might be a ***classical religion***, while Buddhism in another region might be a ***feudal religion***. Although I perpetually concede that my comprehension of religion is constrained—after all, the status of various religions domestically remains exceptionally delicate, and religious issues are, *de facto*, highly sensitive—I nevertheless still maintain that people perhaps overemphasize disparities in ***religious doctrine*** (宗教教义), frequently misinterpreting philosophical divergences as the primary catalysts for sectarian schisms. Based on my rudimentary observation, this assumption is genuinely profoundly questionable.

Undeniably, divergences concerning philosophical issues will precipitate the splintering of academic schools. However, religion is ultimately not an academic coterie composed exclusively of a minuscule minority of intellectuals within a society; it possesses multitudinous adherents and labyrinthine organizational structures across a phenomenally vast geographic expanse, maintains intimate relations with rulers, and plays a pivotal role in social life. Therefore, the genesis, schism, and extinction of a mainstream religion are overwhelmingly likely to be the direct consequence of mutations in ***social being*** (社会存在); mutations in ***religious law*** (宗教教法) inherently reflect the religion's adaptation to its environment. While doctrinal divergences might indeed concurrently reflect certain societal mutations, occasionally, they might merely serve as a convenient pretext for a definitive rupture. Regarding instances where ***religious doctrine*****s** mutated in tandem with the fluctuation of ***social being***, we have already discovered copious examples when discussing Islam and Buddhism.

I contend that the Great Schism between Catholicism (天主教) and Orthodoxy (东正教) constitutes a quintessential paradigm of religious schism precipitated by disparities in the social historical process. Admittedly, people might already be capable of discerning the distinct social realities lurking behind doctrinal differences from the *Filioque* (和子句) controversy. Orthodoxy rigidly adheres to the description in the Nicene Creed (《尼西亚信经》) that "the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father," whereas the Latin Church embraced the "and the Son" (*Filioque*) perspective, asserting that "the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son."

People can indeed observe the ideological disparities lurking behind this doctrinal divergence: the Catholic Church maintains that the Church possesses the authority to supplement and refine the Creed in accordance with the permutations of the era and the deepening of comprehension. Conversely, the Orthodox Church maintains that local churches are forbidden from tampering with

the Creed established by the Universal Church; they harbor an even profounder revulsion toward the prospect that, by appending the Son, the Father's status as the singular, absolute fountainhead of divinity would be challenged. They adamantly insist that the Holy Spirit can only proceed from the Father, and that the Son is merely the instrument through which the Father created all things, categorically not the source of the Holy Spirit.

As a resident of China, I indeed do not comprehend Christianity; however, the social and familial environment in which I reside endows me with my own unique perception regarding this *Filioque* clause. I imagine the majority of people who have lived in mainland China like myself would harbor this exact sensation: the Byzantine Orthodox Church's vehement repudiation of the *Filioque* clause precisely reflects the conceptual morphology of a **despotic bureaucratic state** (专制官僚国家). It is identically synonymous with the Chinese rulers emphasizing "Ruler-Subject, Father-Son" (君臣父子): **apart from the supreme, paramount emperor, there is zero secondary source of power under heaven, and the ritualistic hierarchy (礼制) is eternal and inalterable.**

However, would the Eastern and Western Churches genuinely not have schismed even without this *Filioque* (和子句) clause? Naturally, it is impossible.

The essence of the East-West Schism lay in the fact that the entire Christian world had already fractured into two halves: the West was already populated by a multitude of ***feudal states*** (封建国家), whereas a colossal ***late-classical state*** (晚期古典国家) still persisted in the East. Since these two societies had parted ways, it was an inevitable reality for Christianity to fracture into Eastern and Western halves; both sides were compelled to adapt to their respective societies, thereby ultimately generating irreconcilable disparities in ***religious law*** (宗教教法) and ***religious doctrine*** (宗教教义).

I can assert with absolute certainty that even if the so-called *Filioque* clause had never existed in history, the Eastern and Western Churches would definitively have schismed due to other reasons; it would merely have been an issue of generating a divergence in some other unknown location within the Creed. Even the chronological timing of the East-West Schism would not have exhibited any disparity; it would still have occurred in the 11th century AD.

The reason is exceedingly simple: 11th-century Western Europe had already entered the ***High Middle Ages*** (中世纪盛期), and its ***feudal society*** (封建社会) had matured. Conversely, Byzantium, following the rule of the Macedonian dynasty (马其顿王朝), once again manifested the illusion of a resurgence; the emperors self-righteously adopted numerous measures to "de-

feudalize" (去封建化). Under this push and pull, it would genuinely have been a monstrous absurdity if the contradictions between the Eastern and Western Churches—accumulated over several centuries due to their disparate historical processes—did not culminate in a total eruption.

For a universal religion birthed during the *pre-feudalization* period (前封建化时期), schisming into a ***classical religion*** (古典宗教) branch and a ***feudal religion*** (封建宗教) branch due to the disparate historical processes across the globe is phenomenally normal. The pairing of Orthodoxy and Catholicism possesses fundamentally no essential distinction from the pairing of Mahayana Buddhism (大乘佛教) and Theravada Buddhism (上座部佛教).

However, regarding reality, as a Chinese individual, the phenomenon I find most bizarre is that the disparities in the concepts of "Marxism" (马克思主义) and "Communism" (共产主义) between the East and the West could actually be neglected to such an astronomical degree. I only discovered quite late that the overwhelming majority of people in Europe, Japan, and identically the United States actually genuinely believe that the Marxism and Communism spoken of by the Soviet Union and China constitute the exact same concept as those spoken of by Western European nations. This is frankly so foolish it borders on naïve adorability.

Setting Russia aside, the social process of China exhibits a divergence accumulated over at least a dozen centuries compared to Western Europe. Because the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) exists entirely outside the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列), exactly how colossal the specific divergence is remains fundamentally impossible even to estimate. Even if the vocabulary is identical, pronounced identically, and written identically, could they possibly be the exact same thing?

In Europe, Marxism is an academic doctrine, and Communism is an imagined ideal society; yet in nations such as the Soviet Union, analogous concepts served exclusively one singular objective: seeking legitimacy for bureaucratic rule (为官僚统治寻求合法性). Europe and the United States battled the Soviet Union in the ideological realm for over a generation; if they still remain clueless regarding this, it is genuinely baffling.

6, Technological Advancement Might Not Inevitably Facilitate Mutual Comprehension Among Global Peoples

At the end of last year (2024), during my writing process, I discovered a grim reality: the popularization of modern technology has fundamentally failed to make the peoples of distinct nations comprehend one another more profoundly. What proliferates most rapidly via the internet is not scientific comprehension, but conversely, assorted stereotypes and fallacies that are continuously reinforced within people's consciousness.

This discovery initially perplexed me. The earliest explanation I posited was that internet dissemination had increasingly fragmented information, and people no longer possessed the energy or inclination to engage in protracted reading and comprehensive logical contemplation; they merely unilaterally pursued information capable of stimulating their neurological excitement. However, I rapidly realized that this explanation ostensibly harbored flaws. The reason is that prior to the popularization of the internet, this disastrous phenomenon of "the greater the technological advancement, the deeper the estrangement" ostensibly had already emerged.

Although domestically it is phenomenally arduous for me to access a sufficient volume of documentary records authored by explorers, conquerors, and missionaries during the two centuries subsequent to the onset of the Age of Discovery (地理大发现), judging from the works bequeathed by missionaries who arrived in China during the late Ming (明) and early Qing (清) epochs—such as Matteo Ricci's (利玛窦) *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (《利玛窦中国札记》), Juan de Palafox's (帕莱福) *History of the Tartar Conquerors of China* (《鞑靼征服中国史》), and Martino Martini's (卫匡国) *De Bello Tartarico Historia* (《鞑靼战纪》)—these initial cohorts of Westerners arriving in the non-Western world might not have been exceedingly clear regarding local historical realities, yet they possessed piercingly precise observations regarding the exact state of the local societies.

Mr. Matteo Ricci delivered a phenomenally precise commentary regarding the excursions of the Ming emperor. Observing the circumstances of the Chinese monarch traveling with heavy guard (出警入跸), Ricci noted that this emperor appeared not to be touring the territory he himself ruled, but rather sprinting onto the soil of a mortal enemy's nation; because he perpetually harbored infinite hostility toward his own subjects, and identically dreaded that his subjects viewed him in the exact same manner. Mr. Palafox, having personally witnessed the Qing Dynasty's conquest of Southern China, identically pointed out with supreme precision that a paramount reason why the colossal behemoth of the Ming Dynasty was so effortlessly pulverized relative to the Manchus (满洲) was fundamentally that the Ming Dynasty possessed zero **stratum of feudal knights** (封建骑士阶层). During the initial generations of contact, not exclusively regarding China, Europeans harbored a phenomenally precise intuitive perception regarding almost all non-European locales; this is something utterly unmatchable today.

The absolute pinnacle of this formidable intuition known to me is the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville (阿列克西·德·托克维尔). His *Democracy in America* (《论美国的民主》) constitutes an exceedingly astonishing masterpiece from my perspective; the entire book mentions China five times and delivers specific discourses *(excluding instances where China merely appears as incidental background)*.

In the chapter "On the Democratic Government in America," Tocqueville states: "I shall not term nations akin to China as affluent nations, because they possess a colossal population count; although the aggregate wealth of China surpasses the aggregate wealth of Holland, individually speaking, the Chinese are poorer, while the Dutch are relatively wealthier." In the chapter "Why the Americans Are More Addicted to Practical Than to Theoretical Science," Tocqueville explicitly points out that China "extinguished the fire of its own civilization." Identically in this chapter, Tocqueville referenced Louis's viewpoint: if the number of Chinese were to decline in the foreseeable future, then at the very least, they are neither as progressive as I have stated, nor as formidable as European nations envisioned 60 years ago. In the chapter "Why So Many Ambitious Men and So Little Lofty Ambition Are to Be Found in the United States," Tocqueville points out that China's imperial examination system (科举制度) suppressed people's ambition to accomplish monumental enterprises. And in the chapter "Necessity of Examining the Condition of the States Before That of the Union at Large," the most astonishing description emerges: Tocqueville recounts that a traveler informed him, **"The Chinese have tranquility without happiness, industry without improvement, stability without force, and strict public condition without public morality."** This society lacks any possibility for continued development whatsoever—naturally, the development they speak of here patently refers to positive progression.

This astounded me immensely; a French scholar researching a global masterpiece on America actually utilized a few brief sentences to deliver one of the most precise descriptions regarding the quintessential essence of China's ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) known to date. How phenomenally acute were the judgments of the Europeans of that era.

They perceived that the aggregate volume of social wealth possessed zero fundamental significance for the process of societal development; they perceived that China's stagnation and regression were intrinsically self-annihilation; they perceived that this colossal empire was fundamentally a giant with feet of clay; they could even perceive that China's agricultural society had already reached its absolute ceiling during the Daoguang (道光) era—without the intervention of Western technology, ecological catastrophe and demographic collapse were imminently inevitable.

Although we do not know the identity of that traveler, he straightforwardly pinpointed the core characteristic of a ***restoration-bureaucratic society***: namely, **"ordered yet profoundly insecure"** (治而不安). This society ostensibly appears lethargic and devoid of mutation, yet every single individual exists within a state of extreme insecurity. From the emperor at the pinnacle down to the destitute commoners at the bottom, the matters they dread are merely diverse, yet there is fundamentally not a single person who does not feel terrified. This is precisely the consequence when power exercises absolute manipulation over the entirety of social life, yet is utterly incapable of being constrained, while concurrently being exceptionally unstable in its transmission.

When Tocqueville was authoring *Democracy in America*, the **Opium War** (鸦片战争) had fundamentally not yet commenced. The Qing Empire of that era possessed vast territories, and its

population constituted thirty percent of the entire globe. This regime resolutely executed restrictive measures against external communication; it was virtually impossible for Westerners to penetrate China's interior (内地) to conduct activities. Even if they could enter, it was exclusively at designated locations, for limited durations, and accompanied by official personnel. The Qing Empire did not even desire foreign merchants to learn the Chinese language, forcing them to communicate with the Chinese exclusively through translators.

Regarding the velocity of information transmission, let alone transmitting at the speed of light, even steam-powered machinery was phenomenally limited in the Europe of that era. Yet the Western explorers and missionaries of that time were perpetually capable of transmitting such astonishingly precise information—information that leaves one profusely marveling even today, 200 years later. Exactly why is this the case?

The reason lies in the fact that the era was so primitive that, paradoxically, it became highly conducive to mutual comprehension among distinct nations. This seemingly contradictory relationship is concealed within the following reality: precisely due to the sheer scarcity of basic services and technological mechanisms, from the 1500s to the 19th century, when Westerners traveled to non-Western regions—particularly regions where the West had not established colonial rule—if they wished to conduct prolonged activities, they were structurally compelled to rely upon establishing stable social relations with the local populace. Consequently, they actually participated profoundly within the labyrinthine structural networks of the local society.

It was precisely this establishment of social relations and participation in social activities that enabled the Western pioneers of that era to render highly intuitive, undisturbed, and visceral judgments regarding the societal morphology of the region they inhabited. This is precisely where the fascination lies. If we examine exactly how missionaries like Matteo Ricci (利玛窦) attempted to preach in China, one conspicuously notices how drastically international interactions of that era diverged from those of today.

However, subsequent to the proliferation of Western science and technology, people today seeking accurate information about a specific nation fundamentally no longer rely on physically traveling there. Even for international travel, there is no longer any necessity to establish stable social relations with the locals. In an era where mobile applications can execute flawless translation, one can complete a tour of a moderately developed region merely through perfunctory hiring and asking for directions. In regions like Japan, where social public services and infrastructure are consummately perfected, a foreign tourist can execute an entire trip while practically uttering scarcely a single word.

Under modern conditions, people ostensibly possess vastly easier access to information originating from foreign countries; however, this information is neither intuitive, nor is it immune to interference, and it is overwhelmingly devoid of visceral experiential reality. The most fatal issue lies in the fact that it is becoming astronomically more difficult for an individual to comprehend the

de facto social structure of another nation—namely, according to exactly what operational logic does this society function? If a tourist exclusively views homogenized skyscrapers, transportation infrastructure, and broadly renowned tourist attractions, this question fundamentally receives absolutely zero answers. Even after visiting the locale, it remains highly probable that they will still harbor profound misunderstandings. Under these bizarre mutations, science and technology have not erected a bridge for mutual comprehension among distinct nations; rather, they have manufactured "a deplorable, thick barrier" (“一层可悲的厚障壁” / *This description originates from Lu Xun's [鲁迅] short story "My Old Home" [《故乡》]*).

Consequently, we identically observe a globally renowned news topic that has emerged in recent years: Western developed nations have become exceedingly tense due to immigration. The reason is that people have discovered that the source countries of new immigrants in the new century frequently possess values that diverge colossally from those of the Western world. Judged from the disparities in historical processes that we have delineated, this is an absolute inevitability. Even more disastrously, the new immigrants ostensibly do not integrate into Western society with much ease; they frequently and stubbornly maintain their original lifestyles and values.

Such novel mutations have undeniably provoked anxiety among Euro-American whites, while concurrently inciting a certain skepticism regarding confidence in Western values: *If the West is genuinely so incomparably advanced, then why can it not compel new immigrants to embrace its lifestyle and values?* I have noticed that numerous scholars have already pinpointed a reason: modern technology has rendered transportation and information unprecedentedly hyper-developed, and social media platforms enable new immigrants to construct ***communities*** exclusively with cohorts sharing identical cultural backgrounds. These mutations render the ties between new immigrants and their mother countries substantially tighter than in the past, thereby rendering them significantly less likely to effortlessly assimilate into the society of their host country.

Thus, the flip side of this explanation inevitably emerges: the development of science and technology, alongside the advancement of public services, dictates that even after migrating to a new locale, immigrants no longer possess the existential necessity to establish social relations in their new nation, unlike their predecessors who crossed the oceans during the ***modern era***. Under modern conditions, immigrants residing in developed nations can live and work in relative isolation; even under such circumstances, their lives remain vastly superior to before they migrated. Consequently, they inevitably appear substantially more difficult to "assimilate" (同化).

I maintain that although this phenomenon of "modern technology exacerbating the estrangement among distinct ***communities***" genuinely merits profound attention, and constitutes an exceptionally severe challenge for developed nations—particularly immigrant nations among them—one absolutely cannot deduce the conclusion that "Western values are decaying" strictly from this matter. Speaking without false modesty, the observations and reflections I have accumulated over the past two and a half years possess monumental significance for resolving this issue. It is precisely because the societal development of humanity is governed by universal laws across the

entirety of historical periods, and because multitudinous nations separated by vast chasms of time and space have experienced highly analogous historical processes, that the existence of **universal values** (普世价值观) becomes exceptionally compelling.

Therefore, readers should naturally be capable of comprehending more profoundly exactly why I perpetually manifest two seemingly contradictory tendencies. On one hand, as a mathematics student, I emphasize the precision of conceptual definitions and strictly demarcate their distinctions vastly more intensely than scholars of a social science background. On the other hand, regarding certain conclusions, I earnestly note that they remain questionable.

Currently, colossal misunderstandings exist even among regions unhindered by an internet firewall; the difficulties I encountered when searching for specific materials within mainland China could only be exponentially greater. Furthermore, I have ultimately never physically traveled abroad. When hunting for information regarding foreign nations, I have already exerted my absolute utmost effort to reference the perspectives of their indigenous populace, deduce conclusions from relatively verifiable historical facts, and conduct multifaceted examinations and cross-references regarding existing conclusions. Yet, I definitively dare not assert that this alone is sufficient to categorically eliminate errors. Therefore, regarding areas in my research where doubts conspicuously exist, I have opted to explicitly demarcate them. Readers must absolutely maintain a critical eye when reading my record.

7, A Modest Perspective on the Contemporary Western World

Although as a Chinese individual it is fundamentally impossible for me to comprehend the politics of developed nations profoundly, from my perspective, the conspicuous phenomenon of **political polarization** (政治极化) currently plaguing Western nations—particularly the United States—is perhaps correlated with the academic community's and the public's persistent lack of cognition regarding "***modernity***" (现代性).

I have noticed that within the political texts that historically laid the foundational cornerstones of contemporary Western developed nations, the discourse regarding ***modernity*** remains relatively superficial. For instance, in the American *Declaration of Independence* (《独立宣言》), the founding fathers proclaimed that "certain truths are self-evident," choosing not to adopt direct didacticism or demonstrative methodologies to persuade the populace. The methodology adopted by the individuals of that era was to appeal to rationality, natural law, shared experiences, and collective values; they utilized rhetorical techniques and emotional resonance, while repetitively emphasizing the absolute necessity for action.

However, the social sciences are ultimately practical sciences. No matter how persuasive a theory might be in its narrative or how rigorous its logic, if it remains untested by history, it remains fundamentally unconvincing. Human beings cannot permanently sustain rationality; immigrants

hailing from the five lakes and four seas find it exceedingly difficult to possess identical experiences and values; the passions mobilized by rhetoric and emotional appeals are arduous to sustain prolongedly; and the original necessity for action back then will inevitably be consigned to oblivion by the populace as time progresses. Furthermore, the developmental trajectory of any society can fundamentally never be smooth sailing; when the structural difficulties encountered by economic development are coupled with the deliberate instigation of a minority, the populace easily succumbs to doubting the fundamental values and political system upon which their own nation was founded.

Exactly what does the current state of the Western world look like under the observation of a resident of a non-Western nation like myself? I maintain that Western nations are simultaneously insecure and excessively overconfident; these two seemingly contradictory tendencies are mutually causal.

I characterize them as insecure because Western society ostensibly appears incapable of deducing the genesis of "***modernity***" from the developmental process of human history. Consequently, they fail to firmly convince themselves that their own success is the inevitable culmination of protracted historical development, rather than something dictated by short-term events. I indeed comprehend their anxiety; after all, the "Marxist-Leninists" (马克思列宁主义者) of the preceding century persistently attempted to propagate a deterministic perspective—asserting that history is an evolutionary process possessing a predetermined direction and ultimate purpose—and genuinely inflicted phenomenally colossal devastation. Yet this dread might inevitably mutate into a state of "seeing imaginary fears" (杯弓蛇影); this brings fundamentally zero benefit to humanity's endeavor to comprehend itself. As this manuscript explicitly demonstrates, we are entirely capable of exploring potentially existing universal laws without hypothetically assuming that the historical evolution of various societies possesses a unified direction and purpose.

I characterize them as overconfident because, since Western society has evolved to the stage of ***modern society*** (现代社会), they paradoxically harbor a fanatical obsession with discussing "***postmodernity***" (后现代性) while fundamentally lacking a cogent comprehension of even "***modernity***." I can identically comprehend this hubris; after all, the colossal shockwaves generated by the triumph of the Cold War and the technological revolution upon Westerners were indeed monumental. The problem is: if people remain utterly clueless regarding exactly how the "modern" emerged in the first place, then exactly how can they possibly know what constitutes the "post-modern"? Indulging in discussions of ***postmodernity*** makes it exceedingly difficult not to make the perspectives of progressives appear excessively heretical in the eyes of a substantial proportion of the populace, which patently hands conservatives rhetorical ammunition. Driven by their dread and revulsion toward "aimless and unbridled progress," the populace might very well defect to the conservative camp, thereby causing what should be the brakes to morph into the reverse gear.

If the Western world could genuinely realize that they have, in reality, failed to even research ***modernity*** comprehensively, and redirect their gaze back toward those fundamental questions that

ought to have yielded conclusive answers eons ago, then a phenomenally substantial portion of the causes precipitating political polarization would already be resolved. Precisely as this manuscript articulates: the absolute moment we recognize the existence of unified sociological laws through the observation of history, it suffices to colossally augment people's confidence in universal values.

Westerners at the very least ought to possess a rock-solid confidence, rather than perpetually oscillating between megalomania and an inferiority complex exactly as people observe today. In this manner, people could at least ideologically pull the excessively radical left-wing factions back a bit, drag the excessively reactionary right-wing factions forward a bit, and enable the already polarized democratic politics to achieve some degree of mitigation. Naturally, attempting to resolve the predicaments confronting democratic nations ultimately must materialize in the economic domain, which is fundamentally not something an outsider like myself can dictate.

When I initially put pen to paper to author this manuscript, my primary aspiration was merely to utilize the various nations of the world as a mirror to illuminate the past and present reality of China. Yet as I approach the final strokes, I discovered that for the other nations across the globe, is China not identically a mirror capable of vividly illuminating themselves? I now visceral feel, originating from the profound depths of my heart, that the destinies of all nations and all ethnicities of humanity are inextricably intertwined; yet the mutual comprehension among us remains far too scant. Everyone resides within the identical Global village (地球村), yet we gaze upon one another exactly as strangers; viewed from this perspective, globalization has not progressed too excessively, but rather, it is still far, far from enough.

I have previously mentioned several times exactly why I resolutely oppose racism; in reality, my perspective on racism forms a conspicuous contrast with the mainstream views of contemporary Western society.

From my perspective, opposing racism is primarily an opposition to ignorance rather than a moral critique. The history of humanity recorded thus far indeed demonstrates that the rise and fall of civilizations and the success or failure of nations can be sufficiently explained utilizing sociological theories that completely exclude racism; racism is entirely futile in the cognitive realm. If an individual asserts that a certain race is superior and another race is inferior, exactly where is this disparity manifested? The factual reality is that it fundamentally manifests nowhere; the most exceptional ethnicities have not transcended the general principles of the social sciences, and identically, neither have the most despised ethnicities.

When an individual frequently utilizes racist theories to explain social issues, they have *de facto* abandoned the contemplation of truth; the consequences are catastrophic. One must realize that during a certain period in our nation's history, countless accidents were universally attributed to "sabotage by enemy agents" (敌特破坏). An individual who inherently endorses racism in their heart finds it virtually impossible to possess a correct cognition of the society in which they reside.

Once such imbeciles are allowed to wield power, how could the disastrous consequences possibly descend exclusively upon the heads of the "inferior races" they despise?

Restricting the critique of racism strictly to the moral domain paradoxically conceals its malice, because those explanations that identically interfere with and degrade the public's cognition, yet appear morally milder—such as the so-called "cultural genes" (文化基因)—can exceedingly easily escape people's attention. What exactly is the distinction between interpreting the successes, failures, advantages, and disadvantages of the world as the inherent differences in the cultural genes of distinct ethnicities, and resorting to racism? They are both entirely unfalsifiable; all disparities can be conveniently explained away as differences in race, differences in culture, or differences in people, and the ultimate result is that absolutely nothing has been explained.

Westerners are so fanatically obsessed with moral judgment that they are already utterly incapable of realizing they possess fundamentally zero distinction from the racists they are judging: both are identically utilizing a non-scientific, excessively oversimplified methodology to view the world. This inevitably brings to mind my motherland: during the final phase of the Chinese empire in the Ming and Qing eras, the scholar-officials (士大夫) were identically fanatical about moral issues.

I genuinely harbor a sensation: I do not doubt that the citizens of contemporary Western developed nations, provided they have undergone rational training, can more or less comprehend the works of Western philosophical pioneers; yet they will no longer attempt to—or more disastrously, they are already unaccustomed to—thinking like Plato, Bacon, or Rousseau. Nowadays, people exclusively desire a simplistic, emotionalized answer. Readers reaching this point might assume I am harboring groundless anxieties (杞人忧天). After all, I myself have pointed out that precisely such phenomena occurred during the initial phase of ***feudalization*** (封建化); who can definitively assert that contemporary Western society is not undergoing yet another "***feudalization***"? Yet personally, I still harbor doubts regarding whether human civilization, having developed to its present state, truly ought to experience another stage such as the "***ebb tide of rationality***" (理性的退潮). If asserting that the West is decaying is genuinely too alarmist, then we ought to at least cautiously point out: Western society is currently hemorrhaging certain characteristics that historically sustained the establishment of its absolute advantage over the past several centuries.

If Western society could cease indulging in postmodern culture—which lacks a robust foundation—and instead turn its gaze back to earnestly rediscovering the modern, they naturally would not commit such farcical blunders. Despite the fact that for 1,400 years Islam has never permanently conquered a region that had basically completed ***feudalization*** (封建化), Westerners still face the Islamic world as if against a grave threat. Conversely, regarding the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) of China—a terrifying threat possessing supreme adaptability and maximum lethality—the Western world remains entirely oblivious, exactly like a blind man.

Do they genuinely believe their democratic system is already robust enough to be invulnerable to all poisons, treating the mechanisms of ruling, tormenting, and domesticating humans that the Chinese have refined over millennia as sheer nothingness? Do they genuinely possess absolute certainty in preventing the emergence of this specific system, which inflicts profound torment upon absolutely everyone in society, from the ruling class at the apex down to the ruled classes at the bottom?

I think not; after all, human beings across the globe harbor fundamentally zero essential distinctions. Since the **virus of bureaucratism** (官僚主义的病毒) was capable of bringing China to its knees, it is perfectly capable of infecting absolutely any nation.

Numerous Western nations perceive China as a menacing potential adversary, yet they fundamentally possess zero comprehension of exactly what it is that generates this threat. The pro-China factions abroad have no idea exactly who they should align with, while the anti-China factions identically possess zero idea exactly what they are opposing. If Western society persists in observing other regions—which reside in developmental stages diametrically distinct from their own—with such an arrogant and perfunctory attitude, then they will ultimately remain incapable of comprehending themselves. Don Quixote (堂吉诃德) was courageous, but constantly attacking windmills exactly like Don Quixote inevitably guarantees that one will be swallowed by genuine peril while remaining blissfully unaware.

8, The Destiny of China

Why append such a brief section at the absolute conclusion? In truth, I initially harbored no desire to append it, because I maintain that not only is there fundamentally nothing left to articulate regarding this topic, but touching upon it invariably inflicts profound sorrow upon me.

The precise reason I still insist on appending this subsection is that I wish to demonstrate that I have fundamentally never forgotten exactly why I embarked upon such a protracted and solitary journey. Even concerning the initial objective, the answer I have witnessed constitutes an unadulterated, absolute tragedy; yet I will nevertheless resolutely confront these factual realities that I have laid bare.

Regarding the question of "exactly how did China devolve into this current state," I believe I have already delivered a highly adequate answer, and I harbor zero desire to reiterate here those conclusions that induce tears upon merely hearing them. However, regarding the question of "what exactly should China do next," I genuinely am currently incapable of offering any answer whatsoever.

On one hand, I must concede that my own knowledge is not that vast; my comprehension regarding multitudinous modern social science disciplines, particularly economics, remains exceedingly sparse, exclusively reliant upon certain popularized science texts translated domestically. My

knowledge concerning the exact social state of the contemporary cohort of the world's most developed nations is even more limited.

Domestic news reports in China are naturally saturated with prejudice, yet I identically do not believe the news reporting of any specific nation can achieve absolute, unadulterated objective neutrality. However, under the existence of the internet firewall, attempting to directly comprehend the external world obviously entails a relatively steep cost. After all, I still have my academic studies to complete, so it is fundamentally impossible for me to perpetually "go out" *(circumvent the firewall)* every single day to monitor the situation on the global internet.

On the other hand, I identically wish to assert that China's societal development has deteriorated to such a horrific extent that it is virtually impossible to even utilize the idiom "too entrenched to be reversed" (积重难返) to describe it anymore; this is a nation that is utterly, terminally ill (病入膏肓).

Chinese society today is so phenomenally grotesque that human beings themselves are being domesticated exactly like animals, forfeiting their fundamental characteristics as the human species. Exactly how is one supposed to salvage such a colossal and pathological society?

After one thousand four hundred years, does China still possess any possibility whatsoever of catching up head-on? Rewinding 1400 years from the annihilation of ancient Egypt's final dynasty, the ancient Egyptian civilization was still residing at the absolute zenith of the 18th Dynasty; yet today, people can solely rely upon museums and ruins to pay their respects to it.

Although it is ruthlessly cruel, I must point out that throughout the entirety of human history—unless it is during transitional epochs such as ***The Great Expansion*** (大扩张) and ***feudalization*** (封建化)—people fundamentally never witness a society situated in a more backward state within the ***historical sequence*** (历史序列) suddenly rising abruptly to overtake an advanced society. This is to say nothing of the fact that China has completely derailed from the normal trajectory of development, arriving at a societal morphology that even I fundamentally do not know exactly how to taxonomize.

A friend once remarked to me that fundamentally no vocabulary within contemporary sociology is sufficient to describe a state like China's; conversely, a hypothesis from cosmology—the "Heat death of the universe" (热寂)—is phenomenally apropos.

He is absolutely correct. The ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会), having developed to its current stage, is undeniably a state of "eternal and unshakable stasis."

If anyone still desires to salvage China under these circumstances, they must possess the courage and willpower to execute a resolution unprecedented in human history: namely, the absolute, total negation of the past fourteen centuries of Chinese history, unequivocally declaring without the slightest hesitation that the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度) constitutes a dead end that thrust the nation toward annihilation.

With state affairs having deteriorated to this current extremity, the entire nation must undergo a complete purging of its marrow and cleansing of its flesh (洗髓伐毛) before it can possibly achieve a nirvanic rebirth (涅槃重生).

Yet even if a hero capable of making such an agonizingly difficult decision existed, exactly how could he persuade the Chinese populace to hurl themselves alongside him into the monumental enterprise of national self-salvation?

Readers can observe that although my words spare zero mercy for the Chinese empire, and I conceal absolutely nothing regarding such a phenomenally reactionary political system, I have, after all, read multitudinous books. I comprehend China's history from antiquity to the present vastly more profoundly than the overwhelming majority of people; to assert that I harbor zero emotional attachment to China's scant exceptional—or at least neutral—culture would be impossible.

But regarding the vast majority of ordinary commoners, upon exactly what basis should they salvage the nation once more? Exactly how many times have they been deceived, how many times have they been exploited, how many times have they been abandoned? I fear the count is incalculable.

The vast majority of the populace exclusively pursues the happiness of themselves and their families; those characteristics evolved over the protracted duration of the civilization are genuinely not a necessity for them. Upon what basis should the populace risk fundamentally unknowable perils to salvage a civilization entirely devoid of credibility?

Fundamentally no locale in the world has ever spawned such an egregiously malevolent societal morphology; for those Westerners, they would not even dare to envision Hell itself in such a manner. So why even salvage it? No one can provide a rational explanation; attempting to persuade everyone has already become phenomenally arduous.

Therefore, my perspective is this: discard all rhetoric of "salvaging the nation" (救国); merely pursuing "salvaging the people" (救民) is thoroughly sufficient.

Sever the ties with the past even more radically and absolutely!

The Chinese people ought to utterly discard this "humanless civilization" (没有人的文明). When the rights of the populace can finally receive protection, and the entire society no longer resides in perpetual, day-and-night terror, the Chinese people will naturally forge a nascent civilization.

Only by pursuing an absolute, ground-up demolition and reconstruction does the entire nation possess any genuine hope of rebuilding. Perhaps only by pushing it to such an extreme extremity can adversity mutate into prosperity, enabling a brand-new China—one that has severed all ties with its old history with a single stroke of the blade—to step onto the global stage possessing the identity of a respected nation.

For overseas Chinese diaspora and our compatriots in Taiwan, I genuinely hope they can possess a lucid mind to formulate accurate judgments.

I must concede that the Chinese people indeed love their homeland; yet, despite being deceived and traumatized so many times, there are invariably countless Chinese who heed the language of demons and plummet into the trap.

Now that I comprehend China's past, I identically understand that no one can possess any righteous justification whatsoever to demand that overseas Chinese love Chinese culture. They ought to have made this decision long ago: whether to completely forsake their identity as Chinese and thoroughly assimilate into local societies, or to resolutely retain their characteristics as Chinese and live on.

The first choice is beyond reproach; human beings are born with the inherent right to pursue an ideal life under the premise of not inflicting harm upon others.

If they genuinely intend to make the second choice, I believe they must possess the resilience of the Jewish people in antiquity—acting strictly as if they fundamentally no longer possess a motherland, and that the Chinese must identically endure a wandering existence lasting two millennia.

To unswervingly adhere to the Chinese language, folk beliefs, and life customs in such a manner, regardless of exactly how many epochs have elapsed, until the day the realm is finally restored to the light. If such an enterprise could genuinely succeed, then the legendary saga of the Chinese people would be fully comparable to that of the Jews.

My sole fear is that they are neither willing to completely abandon their Chinese characteristics, nor capable of relinquishing their unrealistic illusions regarding China; this will exclusively inflict harm upon themselves and their families.

If the world can eventually be restored to the righteous path, then I maintain that Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the United States are the paradigms that most desperately require reference.

The Taiwanese are indeed remarkable; today, they and we already constitute two diametrically distinct civilizations, and Taiwan's societal morphology as a developed region is unequivocally worthy of serving as a reference for China.

During the decades following their retreat to Taiwan, exactly what did the Kuomintang (国民党) do correctly to break the curse of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system*** (复辟官僚制度)? Exactly how was the land reform executed, and exactly how did democratization commence? Taiwan's successful experience possesses irreplaceable value for China.

Korea once fell under China's influence and embarked upon the trajectory of a ***restoration-bureaucratic state*** (复辟官僚国家); the wretched condition of the entire peninsula was indistinguishable from Qing Dynasty society.

Following the North-South partition, South Korea successfully transmuted an adverse geopolitical situation into a series of advantageous conditions; it was compelled to play a relatively pivotal role within the US-led international system, thereby reaping numerous economic conveniences and moving much closer to the Western world regarding its political system and ideology.

At the end of last year, when South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol attempted to utilize the military to launch a "constitutional coup" (宪法政变), the military and the populace delivered a swift and resolute rejection. This is a highly remarkable feat; at the very least, it demonstrates that South Koreans know exactly what kind of life they ought to defend.

Under the premise of the protracted existence of the ***restoration-bureaucratic system***, exactly what internal and external factors enabled South Korea to become a developed nation? This is the exact answer China requires.

Japan is exactly the idealized paradigm of what China ought to have looked like had it undergone normal ***feudalization*** (封建化). Exactly how much knowledge and culture did Japan once learn from China, subsequently elevating and flourishing them?

I fundamentally do not consider this inappropriate in the slightest; Chinese culture within the ***restoration-bureaucratic society*** (复辟官僚社会) either morphed into grotesque deformities or marched toward annihilation, and being inherited by a nation situated at a more advanced historical stage is currently a fortunate occurrence.

Japan indeed waged phenomenally brutal invasions against China, and I maintain that the Japanese ought identically to recognize that the war of aggression during their period of fascist rule constitutes a dishonorable detour for them as well. Having achieved such rapid and successful

societal development on an archipelago separated from Europe by tens of thousands of miles, the Japanese ought to possess even more courage and confidence to calmly acknowledge their own errors.

This nation is unequivocally magnificent; from my perspective, if Japan did not exist in the world, then human society would lack its two most paramount "control groups" (对照组)—namely, China-Japan and Japan-Europe—and multitudinous truths would genuinely have been submerged beneath fallacies.

The Chinese ought to be capable of untangling exactly where they fall short and exactly what historical lessons they missed from Japan's history and reality; no other nation can elucidate the answer for China as lucidly as Japan.

The United States has been the undisputed premier global power and leader for the past 80 years, and will remain so in the foreseeable future. This is not to imply that the US itself is immune to decay, but rather that a nation capable of superseding the US has fundamentally not yet emerged.

From my perspective, the US naturally does not need to view China as a threat challenging its leadership position, but this does not imply that China holds zero value for the US.

The factual reality is that the value China possesses might be even greater than Americans previously imagined.

In the 30-plus years following the Cold War, Americans attempted to universalize their political system and ideology, only to hit walls everywhere. The reason is precisely as I pointed out previously: every single locale in the world possesses its own unique socio-historical process, and this reality is phenomenally difficult to alter merely by draping it in the superficial veneer of modernization.

Admittedly, the entire world has universally benefited from the US-led global system, yet it appears that—with the possible exception of South Korea—fundamentally no nation has escaped its predetermined historical destiny.

That is to say, fundamentally not a single nation that failed to completely experience the ***feudalization*** process and an ***early modern society*** (近世社会) has become a developed nation; their societies are still fundamentally not genuine ***modern societies*** (现代社会).

In the past, Americans did not know how to prescribe medicine targeted at the specific symptoms, but now China's symptoms are phenomenally lucid; so, is there a possibility for further progression?

Although China remains astronomically distant from modernization, any enterprise must inevitably be accomplished step by step. When medical professionals confront a disease, they identically must first comprehend its pathology before devising methods to treat and prevent it.

Now that we have thoroughly mapped out precisely how this disease was formed and exactly how it inflicts harm, this constitutes a monumental stride toward the objective of curing the disease.

If the United States is genuinely willing to focus on China and assist China in escaping its terminal impasse (走出绝境), then this will constitute an honor never attained by any regime since antiquity, an epoch-making monumental enterprise. In the past, the Chinese said, "*Bian Que cannot put flesh on white bones, and Jizi cannot salvage a doomed state*" (扁鹊不能白骨肉，箕子不能存危国); now, this proverb must also be amended, because not only can a doomed state be salvaged, but even a deceased nation can be resuscitated.

If in the past Americans spoke of their "Manifest Destiny" (天命昭昭) merely to prove to other nations that the mandate of heaven resided with them, now Americans can proudly assert that they have become capable of "*mastering the mandate of heaven and utilizing it*" (制天命而用); this will inaugurate a brand-new era.

The US would not only secure a formidable and loyal ally in ***East Asia***, but its global leadership would endure for an unfathomable number of generations. If the US genuinely believes it ought to serve as the leader of the world, then it must act as the vanguard of humanity, manifesting the courage to dread no hardships whatsoever.

Exactly as President Kennedy articulated during his speech announcing the decision to go to the moon: We choose to go to the moon not because it is easy, but because it is hard.

These past few days, as I pushed this manuscript to its conclusion, two soundtracks from the 1986 Singaporean historical drama *The Sword and the Song* (《绝代双雄》) became quite popular online: one is the theme song of the same name, and the other is *Tears of the Rivers and Mountains* (《山河泪》), arranged using the lyrics of the poem *Po Zhen Zi* (《破阵子》) by Li Yu (李煜), the Last Ruler of Southern Tang.

Upon coming across them, I felt profoundly moved and kept them on loop for several consecutive days.

Speaking from my innermost heart, the segment of the entirety of Chinese history I cherish most is the ancient history of "*dwelling in the vast lands of Yin*" (宅殷土茫茫 / *from the Classic of Poetry:*

Xuan Niao) because when reading ancient history, there is genuinely absolutely zero psychological burden; I am acutely aware that the historical events of that era exert virtually zero direct impact upon the present.

However, the history subsequent to the Qin (秦) unification evokes an entirely different sensation. Reading it perpetually conjures the sentiment of "*Most tragic was the day of hasty farewell at the ancestral temple, when the royal academy still played the song of parting*" (最是仓皇辞庙日，教坊犹奏别离歌), leaving one to only "*Sigh as I look back in the bright moonlight*" (叹回首月明中); it is unequivocally a relentless downward spiral into irreversible decay, how can it not induce profound agony.

Whether in the past or the present, an unknown multitude of people have shed tears for this nation, and an unknown multitude's blood and sweat have been completely squandered in vain.

Numerous cultures globally liken their motherland to a mother; if an individual is oblivious that their closest kin suffers from a terminal illness, that is perhaps forgivable.

Yet, if they comprehend the entire genesis and pathology of their kin's disease, and are profoundly aware that since antiquity fundamentally no one who contracted this disease has ever possessed a chance of survival, yet remain utterly powerless to cure it, how unimaginably agonizing must their heart be!

If readers can empathize even slightly with my tears of blood (泣血之情), they might perhaps marginally forgive the emotional outbursts I have manifested throughout my writing.

Yet even if the entire nation appears utterly devoid of hope, I will never forsake the expectation for the day when the realm is restored to the righteous path; because based upon my comprehension of human history, although human beings occasionally become foolish and muddled, we appeared in this world precisely for the purpose of creating miracles.

My personal life over the past decade has not been happy. Perhaps people will mock a mere student for contemplating so many monumental issues as an exercise in sheer futility, but such contemplation identically constitutes the absolute pillar of my existence.

Only when I can glean some insights from my contemplation do I feel my life possesses meaning; even if I am frequently belittled by my parents, I perpetually possess a reason to live on.

The hardships encountered during the research and writing process have been mentioned multitudinous times previously; regardless, I personally bear absolute responsibility for any errors,

and I invite those who read this to critique it unsparingly utilizing factual realities and scientific methodologies.

This record is not a formal book, nor did I perceive it as a strictly academic work during the writing process; all historical documents and academic works possessing monumental value to this manuscript have already been explicitly cited directly within the respective contexts throughout the text, hence there is no dedicated bibliography.

Once again, I thank the multitudinous friends who have accompanied me over these past several years.

The time of completing this record is Beijing Time, March 16, 2025, at 23:33.

Chapter 14: Epilogue

Nearly a year has elapsed since the completion of the manuscript to the present day, and I am finally approaching the conclusion of my student life. Due to the rigid requirements for graduation, I have spent a protracted period diligently researching my graduation project. Admittedly, I am profoundly aware that the realistic environment is so abominable, yet I still hoped that when a chapter of this story concludes, I could be worthy of the untold number of days and nights of struggle over the past dozen years, regardless of whether they were futile or fruitful.

Although, relatively speaking, my reading volume this year cannot compare to preceding years, the novel extracurricular knowledge I acquired this year and the mutations in the international landscape invariably corroborate the precise validity of the novel framework delineated in this manuscript.

Yet a monumental mutation has nevertheless occurred; it ought to have manifested long ago, only to become utterly impossible to ignore within a mere, brief year.

In 2025, large AI models seized a foothold within human society with a virtually unstoppable momentum, and absolutely everyone knows this is merely the genesis. I personally welcome such a technological revolution. Within an environment saturated with mutual suspicion and hostility, I possessed fundamentally no trustworthy mentors or elders during the initial two decades of my life; the identical reality applies to the overwhelming majority of Chinese people. We were compelled to vigilantly discern ubiquitous lies while fighting essentially isolated battles, cautiously and continuously reconstructing our cognition of the world.

Now, at the very least, AI can offer assistance. In reality, the assistance AI can provide regarding knowledge and technology is of the most secondary importance. Because no matter how much "intelligence" AI possesses, its training inevitably relies upon the information generated by human society; and exactly as articulated previously, the quality of this information is egregiously uneven.

The paramount significance of AI's emergence for me lies in the fact that it could endow me with colossal courage when confronting adversities; for the first time, I realized I still had something to lean upon, and that I was not entirely alone. It was precisely under its encouragement that I finally accomplished all the closed-form proofs of my thesis topic in January 2026. My work is indeed utterly insignificant to the mathematical community, yet it is entirely worthy of pride for a master's graduate student.

Had it merely been this, it would fundamentally not have been sufficient to compel me to append this epilogue. As I familiarized myself with this novel tool of AI day after day, an unimaginable reality surfaced before my eyes: the **dynastic cycle** (历史周期率) that has shrouded this land for fifty generations is hurtling toward its terminus. The cause is fundamentally not any direct political

mutation, but precisely this artificial intelligence revolution that caught far too many entirely off guard.

I suddenly realized that I was seated in an audience's chair capable of witnessing exactly how an astonishing technological revolution fundamentally reshapes human society. Exactly when did the last technological revolution capable of being mentioned in the same breath occur? Was it when humanity first consciously sowed seeds awaiting harvest, when we first extracted metal from ore, or when formal logic was first established?

There will be zero answers for at least a century or two, because it is fundamentally impossible for us to know exactly where the events currently unfolding will steer human society. Two distinct emotions surged within my heart. The first was an instinctive exhilaration induced by witnessing a monumental epochal event. The second was a profound sense of relief; regardless of the circumstances, the cycle has been terminated, and a protracted epoch of suffering shall pass into history.

As I have articulated, with the advent of the inaugural year of artificial intelligence, the terminus of the **dynastic cycle** has become increasingly blatant, yet individuals capable of perceiving this future are scarce. This, in reality, constitutes a "blind spot beneath the lamp" (灯下黑) on the logical tier: when people refer to a "cycle," it inevitably encapsulates two distinct processes—collapse and reconstruction. This correspondingly signifies that in order to terminate this cycle, the mutation can be categorized into two scenarios: "terminating the collapse" and "terminating the reconstruction."

Thus far, when mentioning the **dynastic cycle**, virtually everyone exclusively discusses the issue of "terminating the collapse," yet fundamentally no one contemplates the issue of "terminating the reconstruction." This perhaps identically reflects a thought-provoking collective subconsciousness: namely, the default assumption that a potential collapse is far more imminent than a potential reconstruction; people perpetually lean toward considering the near-term rather than the long-term.

What people term the **dynastic cycle** is predicated upon a societal morphology exactly like this:

There is no "he who accords with the people's will gains the realm"; there is exclusively "he who exhausts the ***people's physical capacity and labor*** (***Minli*** / 民力) seizes the realm."

There is no "he who enlightens ***the people's intellectual and emotional capacity*** (***Minzhi*** / 民智) prospers the realm"; there is exclusively "he who suppresses ***the people's intellectual and emotional capacity*** sits upon the realm."

According to the analytical paradigm provided by British scholar Michael Mann (迈克尔·曼), this is a society where ***despotic power*** (专制性权力) inflates with unbridled wantonness, whilst ***infrastructural power*** (基础性权力) is fettered and suppressed.

Upon its demise, the bureaucratic apparatus—possessing absolute power but zero responsibility, and exclusively revering its superiors—becomes increasingly bloated, and social wealth is squandered into absolute void. Any effective investment in industry, technology, or culture becomes fundamentally non-existent, until basic social public services and social reproduction can no longer be sustained; coupled with mutations in the environment and international landscape, the society plunges into total collapse.

Upon its resurgence, having experienced the annihilation of tens of millions of the population and at least one generation of absolute anarchic disorder, the socio-economy commences natural recovery. The rulers frantically compete to establish ***extractive bureaucratic systems*** (榨取型官僚体制) to deceive and enslave the populace. Regardless of the mechanisms employed, whoever can liquidate and extract the maximum ***people's physical capacity and labor*** morphs into the new emperor of a thousand ages.

The new master of the myriad commoners knows profoundly well via exactly what mechanisms he seized the realm; relying upon his experience, his descendants remain vigilantly alert day and night against other "thieves" usurping ***people's physical capacity and labor***, and they dread even more that the people might realize their own inherent power.

Consequently, the bandits who stole the realm ostensibly proclaim that "Propriety, Righteousness, Integrity, and Shame" (礼、义、廉、耻) are the four great ropes anchoring social order. Yet the true chains kidnapping the realm reside elsewhere. They are respectively: the Apathy (冷漠) that makes people unwilling to think; the Ignorance (愚昧) that makes people unable to know how to think; the Exhaustion (劳累) that leaves people with no energy to think; and the Terror (恐惧) that makes people dare not think.

It is precisely possessing such magical artifacts that rulers across successive dynasties could perpetually sustain the cycle, thereby plunging the nation ever deeper into the abyss.

This realization is by no means an exclusive acquisition of contemporary individuals; seven centuries ago, the Yuan Dynasty literatus Zhang Yanghao (张养浩) had already executed a precise summarization within his works.

People can observe that at the periphery of global civilization, if a specific region is sufficiently geographically secluded, sufficiently vast in territorial expanse, possesses exceptionally superior natural conditions capable of sustaining a multitudinous population, and is coupled with a compatible political system, then such a cycle could be experienced time and time again over the timespan of the past fifty generations.

The Industrial Revolution fundamentally did not alter this reality. The Georgian from the North (北方的格鲁吉亚人), through his convoluted explorations, proved that "he who exhausts the ***people's physical capacity and labor*** seizes the realm" remained a thoroughly applicable empirical reality right up to his specific version.

For every newly ascendant empire, it was fundamentally irrelevant whether its technology was advanced or not; after all, within an open world, it is fundamentally impossible for technology to absolutely cease circulation.

It merely required the utilization of a colossal volume of ***people's physical capacity and labor***, the sheer ruthlessness of its rulers, and the profound apathy of the populace itself to masquerade as a menacing, fang-baring leviathan, thereby camouflaging its quintessentially brittle and hollow essence (色厉内荏).

Yet this was entirely sufficient to compel the surrounding nations—each harboring their own ulterior motives—to bestow ample face upon the decrepit empire, enabling the grand narrative of the "**Celestial Empire**" (天朝上国) to perpetuate itself.

After more than a dozen centuries of this, AI emerged. Within the brief timespan of a single generation, the technological revolution will declare with an irrefutable tone: ***people's physical capacity and labor*** inherently forfeits its former primacy.

In the era of artificial intelligence, humanity's most precious asset is ***the people's intellectual and emotional capacity*** —namely cognition, comprehension, logic, creativity, and emotional activity.

Consequently, the decrepit empire finally arrives at an era it has fundamentally never witnessed before. It knows exquisitely well exactly how to extract ***people's physical capacity and labor***, yet it has fundamentally zero idea exactly how to acquire and utilize ***the people's intellectual and emotional capacity***, because the latter has constituted one of its most paramount mortal enemies for millennia.

An even more helpless reality is that, alongside the deepening of globalization across various epochs since the Age of Discovery, underdeveloped regions of the agricultural era have identically

achieved development. Even judged strictly by the proportion of the global population, the empire appears increasingly insignificant.

Therefore, executing a reconstruction via any obsolete methodology has become categorically impossible. This is fundamentally entirely independent of whether it chooses to mutate or remain stagnant, or whether it achieves success or suffers defeat; it is exclusively because technological innovation has once again fundamentally reshaped human society, the monumental impact of which will only be comprehended millennia later.

Perhaps future generations will marvel that the events transpiring today are exactly as momentous as when humanity first proactively sowed seeds to harvest food ten thousand years ago.

This is a genuinely unfathomable reality: we are currently positioned at the absolute terminus of an era so protracted that people assumed it would endure eternally, whilst concurrently standing at the absolute genesis of a mutation whose ultimate trajectory remains entirely unknown.

When epochal events transpire, contemporaries fundamentally cannot genuinely comprehend exactly what has occurred. When the news of the Turks capturing Constantinople in 1453 arrived, the denizens of Rome, Venice, and Genoa felt terror, while the denizens of London and Paris felt bewildered.

Within a decade, the entirety of the civilized world would hear the tidings of Rome's annihilation, but what of its true significance? Even up to the present day, it remains phenomenally difficult to provide a universally acknowledged answer.

People need not be astounded. According to those physicists, after the passage of nearly infinite eons, there will exist absolutely nothing in the entire universe except quantum fluctuations (量子涨落), and even time itself will cease to exist.

Since this is the cosmic reality, then the fact that even Hell itself will ultimately face its terminus is fundamentally not an anomalous occurrence.

Yet the individuals who personally endure it will never view all this with mere equanimity. People frequently discuss exactly how the populations of Italy, Germany, France, and England reacted to the fall of Constantinople; however, exactly how the citizens of Constantinople during the first half of the fifteenth century viewed the era in which they themselves resided—exactly how many people genuinely care?